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Sheelah Kolhatkar (*“Embarrassment of Riches,”* p. 32) is the author of *Black Edge: Inside Information, Dirty Money, and the Quest to Bring Down the Most Wanted Man on Wall Street*.

V. S. Naipaul (*“Grief,”* p. 18), who died in 2018, published more than thirty books. In 2001, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Donika Kelly (*Poem*, p. 22) wrote the poetry collections *“The Renunciations,”* which is forthcoming, and *“Bestiary.”* She teaches at Baruch College.

Jamil Jan Kochai (*Fiction*, p. 54), who won an O. Henry award, is the author of *“99 Nights in Logar.”* He is at work on a collection of stories.

Lizzie Feidelson (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 17) is a writer and a dancer. Her work has appeared in the *Times Magazine* and *n+1*, among other publications.

Pascal Campion (*Cover*), an illustrator, is an art director for animation studios in Southern California.

Collier Schorr (*“A Boy Like That,”* p. 42), a photographer, is at work on a multimedia dance project called *“Akerman Ballet.”*

Rachel Nolan (*“Language Barrier,”* p. 26) teaches Latin-American history at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies.

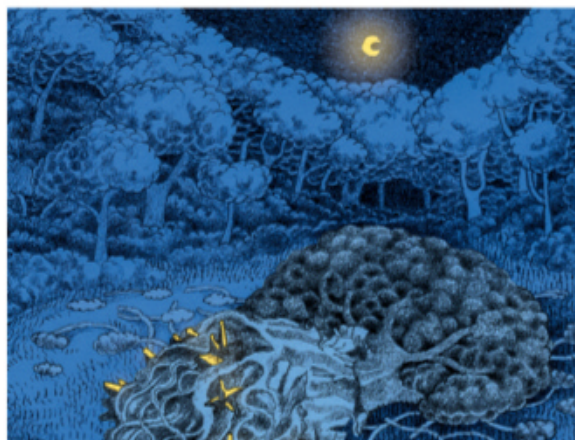
Katy Waldman (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 15), a staff writer, won a 2018 American Society of Magazine Editors award for journalists younger than thirty.

Gerald Stern (*Poem*, p. 56) wrote, most recently, the poetry collection *“Galaxy Love”* and the essay collection *“Death Watch.”* His new book, *“Blessed as We Were,”* will be published in January.

Susan Mulcahy (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 14) has published three books. She is a former editor of *Page Six*.

Hart Pomerantz (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 25), a comedy writer and performer, was an employment lawyer in Toronto for five decades.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



NOVELLAS

Read the novella *“Mother Nut,”* John Jeremiah Sullivan’s first published work of fiction.



POEMS

Excerpts from a new translation of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, by Mary Jo Bang.

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LEFT: ALVIN FAI; RIGHT: BERKE YAZICIOGLU

THE MAIL

THE GIN CRAZE

Many thanks to Anthony Lane for confirming the historical and cultural pedigree of the gin-and-tonic, which I and many friends in British-ruled Hong Kong regarded as more or less the official colonial drink (“Ginmania,” December 9th). Its popularity is a legacy of the Victorian era, when malaria plagued the territory. (As Lane points out, the quinine in tonic water combatted the disease.) I used to live in the colony’s mordantly named “Happy Valley” area. It was a malarial marsh in the nineteenth century, and now it’s home to a famous horse-racing track and several cemeteries, where some of the malaria victims rest. Perhaps more gin-and-tonic would have been in order; Winston Churchill credited the drink with saving “more Englishmen’s lives, and minds, than all the doctors in the Empire.”

Chris Gay
New York City

Lane offers a comprehensive look at the worldwide love of gin, but he leaves out one particular use of the spirit: folklore says that a regimen of nine gin-soaked golden raisins per day relieves arthritis pain almost as effectively as over-the-counter medications. Some have theorized that the juniper berries in gin combine potently with a substance in the raisins. Others say that any pain relief is due to the placebo effect. And still others maintain that straight gin will do the trick, no raisins required.

John Huxhold
Manchester, Mo.

Lane mentions Charles Dickens’s observations about gin’s power to alleviate the misery of London’s poor. One example appears in “A Christmas Carol,” which I read every year. Bob Cratchit, Ebenezer Scrooge’s put-upon clerk, combines “some hot mixture in a jug with gin and lemons,” then pours it into “the family display of glass: two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a

handle.” Bob serves the concoction to the whole family, and a merry Christmas is had by all.

Nina M. Scott
Amherst, Mass.

UNREAL

Patricia Marx, in describing her experiences with virtual reality, jokingly considers moving out of her apartment and into a closet, taking her V.R. headset with her (“The Realer Real,” December 9th). This point touches on the profound: with advances in virtual-reality technology, people may someday find themselves in a world where back yards, spacious living rooms, and spectacular views are less precious. Anyone who has experienced V.R., even in its current fledgling form, can appreciate its allure. The reduction in the value of physical space has implications for everything from real-estate prices to international politics.

G. Randy Kasten
Angels Camp, Calif.

After reading Marx’s fascinating piece on the brave new world of virtual reality, I found myself wondering about the energy requirements and potential environmental impact of the technology. Standard-definition video streaming on Netflix typically uses one gigabyte of data per hour. A V.R. application, by contrast, can use many times more. The Shift Project, a French think tank, reported that, in 2018, online video viewing produced a carbon footprint comparable to that of Spain. With the energy costs of V.R. inarguably higher, developers and users of the technology should consider the effects on the planet before diving in.

Rebecca Scherzer
Sausalito, Calif.

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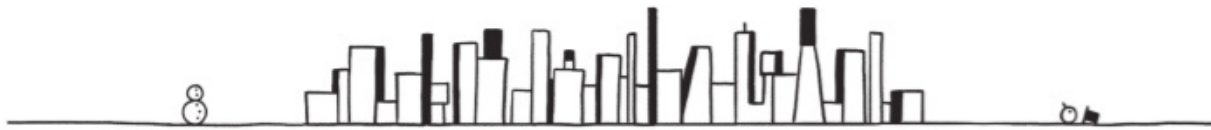
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The lowland gorillas at the **Bronx Zoo** tend to congregate indoors during the winter rather than roam around outside in their forest habitat. But, after sunset, their sculptural counterparts illuminate the zoo's grounds, as do fanciful renditions of lions, giraffes, zebras, rhinos, elephants, ring-tailed lemurs, cranes, dolphins, and sea turtles. The Holiday Lights festival—which is back after a twelve-year hiatus—also features ice-carving demonstrations, costumed characters, and train rides. Its final days are Jan. 3-5.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW PILLSBURY

“Making Marvels”

Metropolitan Museum

This immense exhibition features a trove of impossibly opulent European objects from the mid-sixteenth to the eighteenth century, showcasing the scientific theories and technologies of the time—as well as the wealth of royal collectors. The parade of curiosities begins with “The Imser Clock,” ca. 1554–61, which astounded the imperial court of Ferdinand I with its representation of planetary positions. A projected montage of closeup footage shows the complex, gilded timepiece in action, ticking and chiming as its mechanical figurines rotate. (The show, which might otherwise be weighed down by its abundance of inert filigree, is enlivened by beautifully produced videos like this one.) Presented among the automata, astrolabes, and spring-powered models of the universe are wonders of the natural world. The astonishing Dresden Green, the world’s largest diamond of its kind, was acquired by August III of Poland, in 1722, and later set in a fantastic ornament for a hat. The *Kunstammer* treasures on view may have been primarily intended to entertain, and, indeed, delightfully garish works like the South German “Automaton Clock in the Form of Diana on Her Chariot,” ca. 1610—which shot tiny arrows as part of an aristocratic drinking game—still do.—*Johanna Fateman (Through March 1.)*

“A New MOMA”

Museum of Modern Art

The Vatican, Kremlin, and Valhalla of modernism has reopened, after an expansion that adds forty-seven thousand square feet and many new galleries. Far more, though still a fraction, of MOMA’s nonpareil collection is now on display, arranged roughly chronologically but studded with such mutually provoking juxtapositions as a 1967 painting that fantasizes a race riot, by the African-American artist Faith Ringgold, with Picasso’s gospel “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” (1907). Some of the rehangs electrify, notably in the first room of the permanent collection, where a sequence of Symbolist work—by the likes of Redon, Vuillard, Ensor, Munch, Gauguin, and Henri Rousseau—leaps, after a de-rigueur pause for van Gogh, to Cézanne, who comes off more than ever as revolutionary. (The room also has six lyrical ceramics by George E. Ohr, the nineteenth-century “Mad Potter of Biloxi”—one of several invigorating nods to formerly scanted outsiders.) Piet Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie Woogie” (1942–43) is freshly recontextualized as an outrigger to an eye-opening historical show of Latin-American art, which includes work by the ingenious Brazilians Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica. The best time to visit the revamped MOMA is your first, punctuated with reintroductions to old artistic companions. Masterpieces dulled by overfamiliarity in an account that had become as rote as a college textbook spring to second lives by being repositioned.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Ongoing.)*

Suzanne Jackson

Ortuzar Projects

DOWNTOWN In the late nineteen-sixties, Jackson was a pivotal figure in the burgeoning Los Angeles art scene: she ran the legendary Gallery 32, which exhibited up-and-coming African-American artists including David Hammons and Senga Nengudi. She is also a gifted artist herself, as this show of lyrical abstractions reveals. Based in Savannah, Georgia, since 1996, Jackson makes both paintings and “anti-canvas,” big semi-sculptural works that suggest theatre scrims and quilts, using materials as varied as bag netting, leather, peanut shells, and paper scraps. Even when her surfaces become busy with overlapping washes of acrylic color and accumulated textures, they maintain an air of uncluttered effervescence. But Jackson can also convey intense depth, as she does in the commanding, burlap-backed “Blues Garden + Track/Back-Sea,” from 2010, a jagged work with a marbled indigo surface. It is almost inconceivable that these impressive pieces,

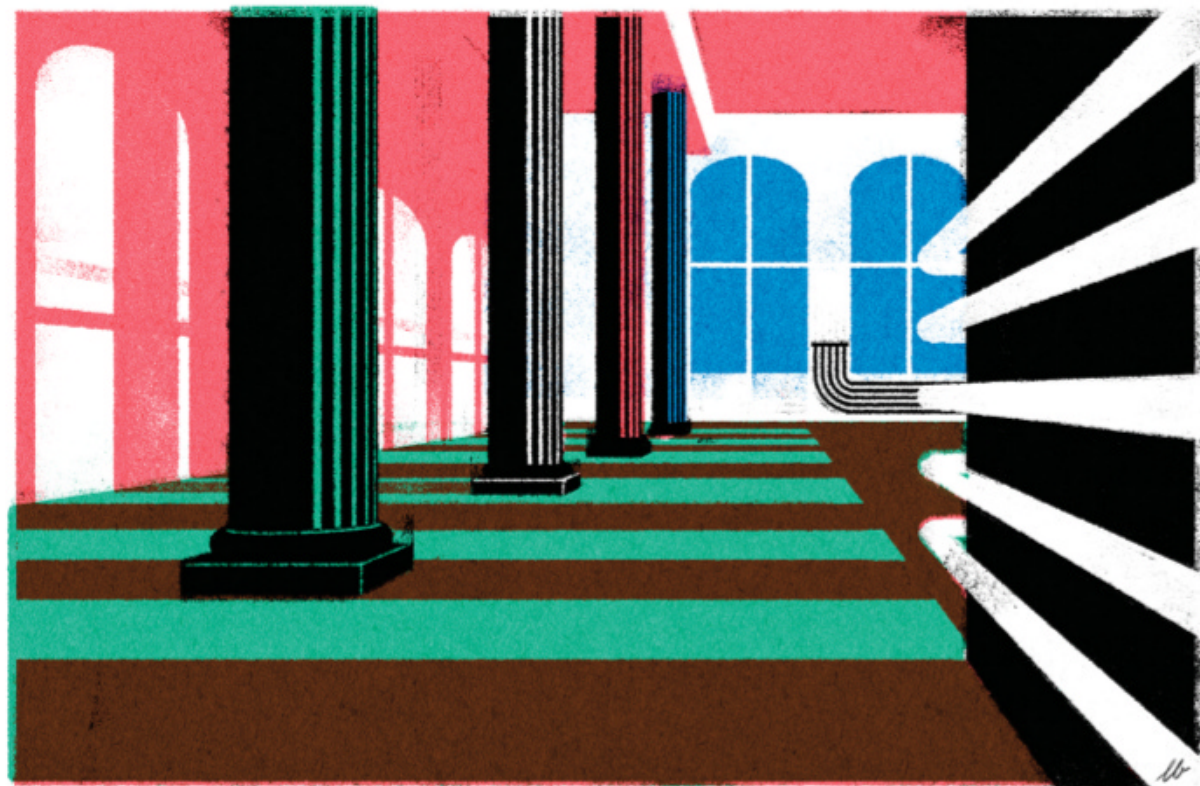
most made in the past decade, constitute the artist’s solo debut in New York.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 25.)*

Barbara Probst

Higher Pictures

UPTOWN In early 2000, this German artist (who is based in Munich and New York) photographed herself, using a strobe light and twelve cameras, on a midtown Manhattan rooftop at night. The resulting images—a mix of color and black-and-white—are now on view in an installation titled “Exposure #1: N.Y.C., 545 8th Avenue, 01.07.00, 10:37 p.m.” Probst captured herself at the height of a graceful jump—as well as her equipment, the roof’s parapet, and the glittering city beyond—from a variety of distances and angles. The multipart work wraps around the small gallery to dramatic effect, simultaneously bringing viewers close to the artist and stationing them, voyeuristically, in the shadows. It’s striking how differently these

AT THE GALLERIES



The nonprofit **Artists Space** was founded in SoHo, in 1972, as a refuge for experimentalists. Cindy Sherman showed her “Film Stills” there for the first time, in the late seventies, when she was also briefly the receptionist (who once came to work dressed as a nurse). In 1989, Nan Goldin organized the group exhibition “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,” a cri de coeur deploring the AIDS epidemic, honing the activism she now directs at the Sackler opioid empire. For forty-seven years, Artists Space has been peripatetic, occupying five different locations. Now, as commerce dominates conversations about art—and artists need alternative strongholds more than ever—it has found a long-term home in a cast-iron building in Tribeca. Superbly designed by the architectural firm Bade Stageberg Cox, the two-level space feels at once permanent and provisional; the entrance on Cortlandt Alley, off White Street, sets the perfect liminal tone. The quartet of inaugural shows (through Feb. 9) is a hit-or-miss affair—so it goes with experiments—curated by Jamie Stevens, with sculptures by Danica Barboza, Jason Hirata, Yuki Kimura, and, most impressive by far, Duane Linklater.—*Andrea K. Scott*

perspectives render one strobe-lit moment: alternately glamorous, desolate, or forensic.—J.F. (Through Feb. 8.)

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Regina Carter

Jazz Standard

The jazz violinist Regina Carter has risen to the top of her field by way of dashing technical skills combined with an imaginative fascination with ethnomusicology. Her far-reaching recordings swing from investigations of Southern and African roots music and her heritage in Detroit to a centennial tribute to Ella Fitzgerald. Also playing: The trumpeter Sean Jones (Jan. 2-5) has worked with both the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and the SFJAZZ Collective, two votes of unqualified confidence. Leading his own quartet, he exhibits his capacious flair as a bracing straight-ahead player of conviction.—Steve Futterman (Dec. 31-Jan. 1.)

Chris Potter Circuits Trio

Village Vanguard

Chris Potter, thanks to his profuse gifts as a saxophonist, could have easily maintained his position as a mainstream jazz power figure, but he's been stretching himself as a player, a composer, and a bandleader, juxtaposing offbeat outfits with his recognized work as a post-bop juggernaut. His Potter Circuits Trio links the leader's horns of plenty to the shape-shifting textures of James Francies's keyboards and the multidirectional rhythms of Eric Harland's drums.—S.F. (Dec. 31-Jan. 5.)

Joseph Arthur

City Vineyard at Pier 26

If New Year's Eve traditionally attracts audiences who attend concerts only sparingly, the first of January must be for the truly committed. Enter Joseph Arthur. For the past decade, the singer, who moonlights as a visual artist and a video podcaster, has kicked off each January onstage. Arthur is trend-averse; his style of downtown cool may no longer be considered particularly cool, but no matter. He clings to New York rock with the dogged conviction of a true believer.—Jay Ruttenberg (Jan. 1-2.)

Gonzalo Rubalcaba Trio d'été

Dizzy's Club

When Gonzalo Rubalcaba debuted before a North American audience, in the nineties, the pianist was far too eager to flaunt the extravagant virtuosity he had acquired by way of a vaunted Cuban musical education. He's since calmed down—though his golden touch is still intact—and now displays a focussed maturity that comes from close collaboration with such exemplars of economical improvisation as the late Charlie Haden.—S.F. (Jan. 2-5.)

Theo Parrish

Nowadays

The Detroit dance producer Theo Parrish doesn't purvey house music so much as he does the constellation of soul, jazz, and disco that the style was originally built from. His recordings—see the loose, live-sounding "What You Gonna Ask For," from last summer—and unhurried d.j. sets tend to be ruminative but always in the pocket. This open-to-close session is an ideal showcase for his humid dance-floor magic; Parrish is best experienced at length.—Michaelangelo Matos (Jan. 3.)

Anthony Naples & Four Tet

Nowadays

The New Yorker Anthony Naples and the Londoner Four Tet both have wide-open tastes: they make dance tracks that shimmer like desert heat and fill their deliberately paced d.j. sets with whimsical choices. A 2017 set on Brooklyn's The Lot Radio ranged from a steel band covering James Brown to gurgling, pitch-bent house. Their latest meeting should ease dancers back to the post-holiday grind—and offer a welcome respite from the workaday.—M.M. (Jan. 4.)

Boyish

Elsewhere

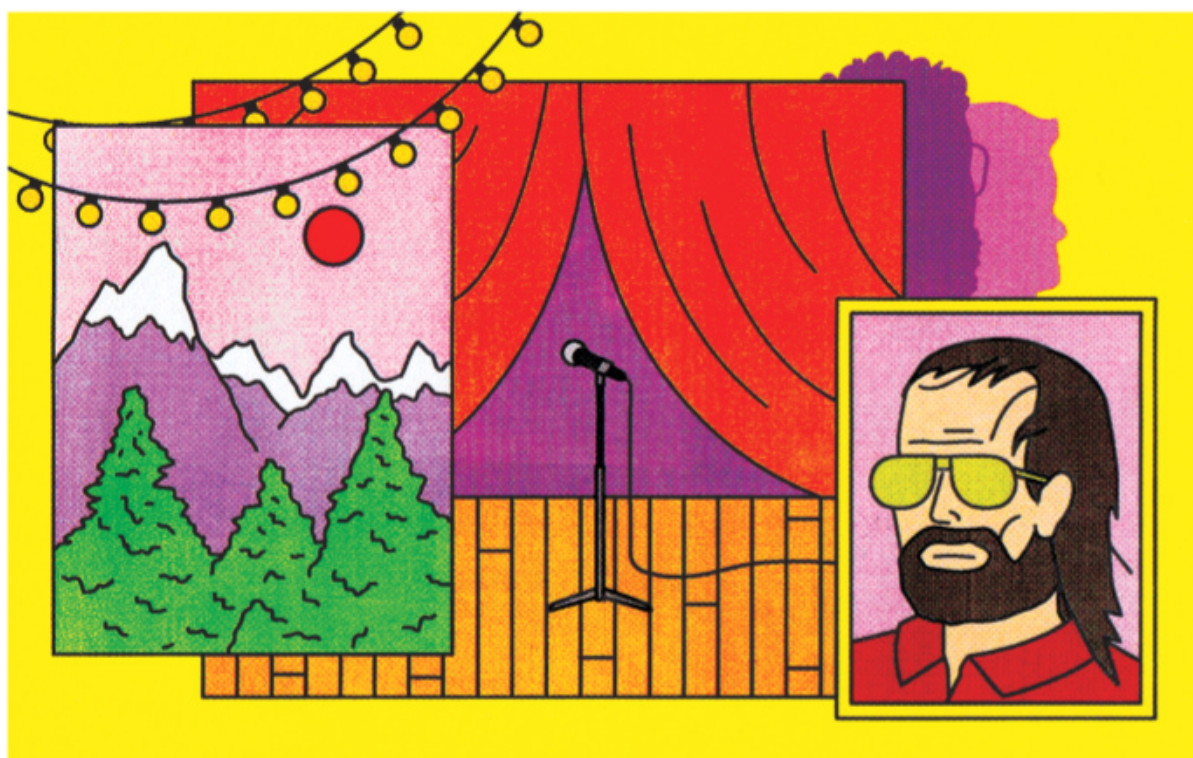
Boyish describes itself as a band that was created after "feeling the need to start over, graduating college, and having no idea what is going on." Yet on its lone album, "Carnation," the fledgling group makes a show of looking uncertainty straight in the eye in songs that are confident in their musicality even when tackling themes of angst and doubt. Some of that vigor comes from the group's lead singer, India Shore, who occasionally abandons the vintage warmth of her voice to belt out notes that are raw and full of longing.—Jullyssa Lopez (Jan. 4.)

Starchild & the New Romantic

Brooklyn Bowl

Bryndon Cook, the mind and multi-instrumentalist behind Starchild & the New Romantic, has worked with such heavy hitters as Solange, Chairlift, and Blood Orange, and his own music is equally variegated. His latest release, "VHS 1138," stands in stark contrast to his effervescent retro-pop album "Language," from 2018; it embraces hip-hop and more subdued tones, which place the shifting qualities of his voice front and center. The

INDIE ROCK



For a segment of the music world, the back half of 2019 was shrouded by the sui-generis songwriter **David Berman**: his triumphant return from musical hibernation, then, weeks later, his head-spinning suicide. Within hours of his death, the accolades that often eluded him in life—where was this man's MacArthur grant?—poured forth like water bursting from a dam. The Berman tribute taking over Union Pool on Jan. 4, his birthday, is not the first such event, nor will it likely be the last. Organized by the singer's college roommate and occasional collaborator Gate Pratt, the concert is anchored by musicians who backed Berman at various stages of his bands the Silver Jews and Purple Mountains, including Steve West, Matt Hunter, and Kyle Forester. The spotlight falls to a series of guest stars offering renditions of Berman's bleakly funny words, where stray bits of the divine habitually slice through the American quotidian.—Jay Ruttenberg

evolution is fitting for an artist who seeks to work outside the limits of expectation—even his stage name offers a fluidity between solo act and band, and between his old-school influences and his present creations.—*Briana Younger (Jan. 5.)*

Motion City Soundtrack

The Paramount

Motion City Soundtrack formed in the late nineties and began writing the kind of careening, early-two-thousands Warped Tour pop punk that encouraged listeners to trade singing for jaunty scream-alongs. A lot has happened in the band since then—lineup changes, breakups, hiatuses—but members of the most recent iteration have teamed up for a reunion tour that lets fans relive the pep of their catchy, somewhat existential past material. They also play Manhattan's Webster Hall on Jan. 8.—*J.L. (Jan. 7.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

“Der Rosenkavalier”

Metropolitan Opera House

Richard Strauss's “Der Rosenkavalier” is a gilded fantasy of Vienna—all waltzes and silver filigree—cross-pollinated with the antics of comic opera. The balance of the work often hinges on the performance of the Marschallin, and the soprano Camilla Nylund, in her company debut, gives an exquisite performance. Painfully aware of the passage of time, Nylund's Marschallin is philosophical about the need to push away her younger lover, Octavian (Magdalena Kožená, sounding a bit tense in the role). Golda Schultz (a shimmering-voiced Sophie) and Günther Groissböck (a delightfully boorish Baron Ochs) complete the principal cast in Robert Carsen's production, which swings from elegance to slapstick to bawdiness; Simon Rattle conducts Strauss's extravagant score with contained lyricism.—*Oussama Zahr (Jan. 1 at 7 and Jan. 4 at noon.)*

James Moore

The Stone at the New School

James Moore, a guitarist and composer greatly admired in local new-music circles, presents a Stone residency that, though abbreviated, still offers a fair impression of his range. The first evening's program features Moore's compositions for drums, strings, accordion, and voice. Forever House, Moore's moody art-rock quartet, holds the stage on Night Two; on the final evening, Moore joins his bandmates in the electric-guitar quartet Dither to present a premiere by J. G. Thirlwell, plus additional works.—*Steve Smith (Jan. 2-4 at 8:30.)*

Here & Now Festival

Bargemusic

The good ship Bargemusic greets the New Year with new music—specifically, three days of local and world premières composed by

OPERETTA



Four years ago, the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players came under fire for the promotional images for its production of “**The Mikado**,” which featured an actress in yellowface. The work's defenders claimed that it merely used the visual tropes of a fantasized Japan to lampoon the British upper classes, while its critics pointed out that satire is no excuse for casual racism. The company, in collaboration with an advisory panel and Asian-American theatre professionals, unveiled a new production in 2016, which returns to Kaye Playhouse (Jan. 4-5). Putting its satire where its mouth is, the staging frames the action as the origin story of the work itself and transplants “The Mikado” back to Victorian-era England—where the jokes can still be witty, and the music rapturous—with the cast in suits and bustle skirts instead of kimonos and Kabuki makeup.—*Oussama Zahr*

Eric Moe, Adolphus Hailstork, David Taylor, Kevin Puts, and others. In each program, Lev Zhurbin, the charismatic violist and composer better known as Ljova, plays original works for *fadolin*, a six-stringed instrument that boasts the range of the violin, the viola, and most of the cello.—*S.S. (Jan. 3 at 7, Jan. 4 at 6, and Jan. 5 at 4.)*

Chopin and Szymanowski

Brooklyn Historical Society

Polish art songs don't enjoy the same popularity on concert programs as works from other European traditions; the Brooklyn Art Song Society makes its case for their vitality by contextualizing them alongside piano works. Chopin's gracious, folk-tinged vocal lines have a cousin in his famous mazurkas, which add a dash of pianistic flair to Poland's humble yet proud national dance. Szymanowski's piano triptych “*Métopes*,” inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*, has a slippery sense of movement, setting the mood for the coloratura flights of the fanciful “*Songs of a Fairy-Tale Princess*.” The performers include the singers Sarah Nelson Craft and Amy Owens and the pianists Miori Sugiyama, Spencer Myer, and Michael Brofman.—*O.Z. (Jan. 3 at 7:30.)*

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra

New Jersey Performing Arts Center

Clara Schumann (1819-96) was among the nineteenth century's most formidable musicians—a prodigious pianist and a skillful composer who was ill served by contemporary custom and a historical record that favors men. Happily, a handful of meaningful tributes have surfaced this season, honoring the two-hundredth anniversary of Schumann's birth. To open the New Jersey Symphony's Winter Festival, Xian Zhang conducts the composer's brilliant Piano Concerto in A Minor, with the eloquent Inon Barnatan as the soloist, alongside staple works by Smetana and Prokofiev.—*S.S. (Jan. 3 at 8.)*

New York Philharmonic

David Geffen Hall

The stylish pianist and versatile conductor Jeffrey Kahane gets the New Year off to an effervescent start with a blithe mix of works. He conducts Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 from the keyboard, then mounts the podium

for Respighi's "Trittico botticelliano" and Haydn's Symphony No. 96 ("Miracle").—S.S. (Jan. 3-4 at 8 and Jan. 7 at 7:30.)

"Broken Silence"

DiMenna Center

The rationale behind the title of this new evening-length piece by the composer and improviser Craig Shepard is twofold. As a member of the globe-spanning Wandelweiser collective, Shepard hews to an aesthetic in which sound and space are held in a fragile equilibrium. But "Broken Silence" also refers to victims of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, whose testimonies are a central part of this meditative chamber work meant to facilitate contemplation and healing.—S.S. (Jan. 6-8 at 8:25.)

Omer Quartet

Merkin Hall

Anyone hoping to catch a glimpse of tomorrow's most promising concert-music attractions today would be well advised to look into the "Tuesday Matinées" series at Merkin Hall, a dependable incubator for burgeoning talent. Here, the Omer Quartet, a young ensemble with several major honors and accolades to its name, performs substantial quartets by Schubert and Beethoven; completing the bill is "Porcupine Wash," a new piece by the buzzed-about composer Gabriella Smith.—S.S. (Jan. 7 at 2.)

DANCE

New York City Ballet

David H. Koch

This time of year, Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" music becomes ubiquitous. It's easy to roll your eyes, but, once you sit in the theatre and hear the first notes of the overture, a thrill inevitably kicks in. Boris Asafiev, an early-twentieth-century Russian musicologist, called it "a symphony of childhood": many of the sensations we feel as children—fear, extreme excitement, an attraction to things we don't understand, the desire to grow up and the simultaneous desire to remain a child forever—are reflected in the music. The choreographer George Balanchine understood this and made a ballet, in 1954, that is still performed by the company today. In "George Balanchine's The Nutcracker," fun and coziness are tinged with terror, and the world of the imagination is just as real as the Biedermeier furniture and the dancing children.—Marina Harss (Through Jan. 5.)

Alvin Ailey

City Center

Alongside Ailey classics and recent imports by Camille A. Brown and Aszure Barton, the final programs of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's City Center season offer a few more chances to see this year's stellar première, "Ode," by the company's new resident choreographer, Jamar Roberts. It's a grief-stricken

meditation on gun violence, but it contains no gunshots. Instead, the tension comes from a challenging jazz recording by Don Pullen, and from the way the dancers stay together and fall apart. The first cast is all male, but on Jan. 1 an all-female cast gives it a try.—Brian Seibert (Jan. 1-5.)

Dorrance Dance

Joyce Theatre

Finishing up its three-week holiday season at the Joyce, Michelle Dorrance's bright band of tap dancers saves the best for last. In addition to its new version of "The Nutcracker," set to the swinging 1960 Duke Ellington-Billy Strayhorn arrangement, the company brings a guest: the veteran clown Bill Irwin. He provides the true vaudevillian wit that the super-talented troupe sometimes has to fake. In his charming "Harlequin and Pantalone," he gives the standout company member Warren Craft a double role of loose-limbed virtuosity, as both a free-spirited jester and the master who oppresses him.—B.S. (Jan. 2-5.)

American Dance Platform

Joyce Theatre

Early January is the season for dance showcases, timed to coincide with conferences for dance theatres from around the world who come to New York to find new work to present. For the general public, this offers a chance to consume a tasting menu of dance in a short period of time. This series at the Joyce is made up of four programs, each featuring two ensembles. Of particular note are the modern-dance troupe Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (Jan. 7 and Jan. 12), the innovative and socially engaged ODC/Dance, from San Francisco (Jan. 9 and Jan. 11), and the excellent Brooklyn-based hip-hop company Rennie Harris Puremovement (Jan. 10-11), all showing recent work.—M.H. (Jan. 7-12.)

THE THEATRE

A Christmas Carol

Lyceum

The Dickens classic receives a warm, solicitous production, directed by Matthew Warchus ("Matilda") and adapted by Jack Thorne ("Harry Potter and the Cursed Child"), with a wild-haired, wild-eyed Campbell Scott as Ebenezer Scrooge. (His father, George C. Scott, played the role in the 1984 movie.) The topnotch cast includes the delightful Andrea Martin, impishly foreboding as the Ghost of Christmas Past, and the golden-voiced LaChanze, as a reproachful, Caribbean-inflected Ghost of Christmas Present. Scrooge's misery gets a passionate backstory in scenes with his drunken, angry father and a lost love. In a modern twist, when Scrooge decides to turn it all around, his ghosts implore action over fantasy, and the ensuing feast set piece becomes a giddy free-for-all. Tiny Tim is played alternately by Jai Ram Srinivasan and Sebastian Ortiz, both of whom have cerebral palsy; at a recent matinée, Ortiz brought the house down with his natural depiction of gen-

erous humanity. Arrive early for pre-show live music and to catch clementines and cookies tossed by performers to theatregoers, nearly every one.—Shauna Lyon (Through Jan. 5.)

Greater Clements

Mitzi E. Newhouse

In Samuel D. Hunter's new play, Maggie (Judith Ivey) lives in Clements, an Idaho mining town that has no more miners and is losing its status as a town, too. Resentful of Californian invaders, locals have decided to unincorporate: street lights are off, and Maggie, who runs a museum dedicated to the area's mining history, is closing up shop. She's ready to move on, especially once Billy (Ken Narasaki), a past love, arrives to offer her a future, but she's held back by her son, Joe (Edmund Donovan), an isolated and socially inept twenty-seven-year-old. The pace of this restrained character study, directed by Davis McCallum, is lifelike, if sometimes too slow; Hunter has a classical sense of structure that verges on the predictable, and the last half hour could be scrapped. But there is deep, complex feeling here, and a standout performance from Donovan as an overgrown boy desperate to learn to be a man.—Alexandra Schwartz (Through Jan. 19.)

Halfway Bitches Go Straight to Heaven

Atlantic Theatre Company

Stephen Adly Guirgis's rough-cut gem of a new play is set in a government-funded halfway house for women on the Upper West Side, run by Miss Rivera (Elizabeth Rodriguez, in one of the play's many sensational performances). Among its residents are Queen Sugar (Benja Kay Thomas) and Munchies (Pernell Walker), black women who handle the hostile world by laughing in its face; Rockaway Rosie (Elizabeth Canavan), a soft-faced white drunk who wants only to be liked; the teen-age Little Melba Diaz (Kara Young, an actor to watch), a straight-A student who's been through hell; Betty Woods (the startling Kristina Poe), a fleshy recluse who refuses to bathe; and Wanda Wheels (Patrice Johnson Chevannes), an elegant, aloof former actress. The alpha of the group is Sarge (the astounding Liza Colón-Zayas), a short, pugilistic, butch Iraq veteran, who is in love with Bella (Andrea Syglowski), a former stripper trying to kick heroin. Guirgis is a wizard at getting language to flow hot, funny, and fast, and the superb ensemble—beautifully handled by John Ortiz—matches his skill. In this world of broken women, words can be both weapon and salve.—A.S. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/23/19.) (Through Jan. 5.)

Jagged Little Pill

Broadhurst

This new musical, directed by Diane Paulus, with a book by Diablo Cody, uses the songs of Alanis Morissette's 1995 album to paint a tableau of white suburban anomie. Mary Jane Healy (Elizabeth Stanley) is a wife and mother addicted to painkillers, and her husband, Steve (Sean Allan Krill), is distant and addicted to porn. Their adopted daughter,

Frankie (a charismatic Celia Rose Gooding), who is black, is a highly principled social-justice advocate at school; her brother, Nick (Derek Klena), is an overachiever crumbling under his parents' expectant pride. The show's many "issues" include transracial adoption and rape culture, opioids and bad marriages, catty neighbors and the perils of meritocracy, bisexuality, and, fleetingly, prayer. If one theme predominates, it's the inner lives and imperilled freedom of women, but the show's insistence on making its story ever bigger, broader, and more inclusive leaves each of its women underdescribed and essentially unknown.—*Vinson Cunningham* (12/16/19) (*Open run.*)

Judgment Day

Park Avenue Armory

The human element feels like an afterthought in Richard Jones's staging of Ödön von Horváth's dark morality tale, from 1937, at the Park Avenue Armory. Paul Steinberg's pharaonic set consists of twenty-five-foot-high slabs wheeled around the shiny black floor as stylized trees lurk in the background. At their most stunning, Drew Levy's sound design and Mimi Jordan Sherin's lighting combine to create an almost physical impression of passing trains. The over-all effect is breathtaking, with the actors often looking like figurines in a giant model. The deliciously arch Harriet Harris stands out as a vicious gossip, but the performances are haphazard, which defangs the story (smoothly adapted by Christopher Shinn) of an accidental murderer (Luke Kirby) and townspeople consumed by mob mentality. The extravagant design is never less than entrancing, but we are far from Jones's 2017 masterpiece, "The Hairy Ape."—*Elisabeth Vincentelli* (Through Jan. 10.)

London Assurance

Irish Repertory

The 1841 London première of this broad, literate farce was a great success for the twenty-year-old Irishman Dion Boucicault. Here, Charlotte Moore directs a spirited ten-person cast of exquisite comic skills, led by Colin McPhillamy as Sir Harcourt Courtly, a perfect, pompous ass, whose impending marriage to the young, beautiful Grace Harkaway (Caroline Strang) has far more in common with the transfer of property than with anything resembling romance. That angle is covered by Grace's attraction to Courtly's son, Charles (Ian Holcomb), and their smart interactions carry a whiff of the sparring between Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick. The action is loaded with mistaken identity, overheard plans, hiding behind curtains, and dozens of asides to the audience, which land, with odd sophistication, like the characters' interior monologues. The entangling of the plot proves to be more engaging than its unravelling, but the company brings it all to a funny, fizzy conclusion.—*Ken Marks* (Through Jan. 26.)

Sing Street

New York Theatre Workshop

In Dublin, Ireland, in 1982, the sixteen-year-old Conor (Brenock O'Connor) assembles a

rock group with some classmates at Christian Brothers high school, battles bullies, and impresses Raphina (Zara Devlin). Based on the 2016 film written and directed by John Carney (who also wrote and directed the film "Once"), with a book by Enda Walsh (who wrote the book for the stage musical based on "Once") and songs by Carney and Gary Clark, this musical, directed by Rebecca Taichman, is a bit more sentimental than the movie. But the cast of fourteen (plus one gratuitous live rabbit) captures even more winningly the dumb joy of being in a teen-age band, not least because the actors play their own instruments. Bob Crowley (costumes) and J. Jared Janas (hair and makeup) build a nice gag in which the boys grow ever more peacockish with each scene.—*Rollo Romig* (Through Jan. 26.)

MOVIES

Bombshell

Jay Roach's film is about the fortress of Fox News, showing how it was breached from within by female employees who had had enough—enough, in particular, of Roger Ailes (John Lithgow), who is depicted as the bully-in-chief. Three women, two of them based on real people, summon the courage to lead a rebellion. Megyn Kelly is played by Charlize Theron with such precision that she appears, disconcertingly, to be Kelly; Nicole Kidman is Gretchen Carlson, who launches legal action against the company; and Margot Robbie has the tricky task (which she fulfills with her usual panache) of portraying Kayla Pospisil, a fictional figure who represents the many victims of Ailes's sexual oppression. The movie is combative, hectic, and impatient, as if it were on deadline to dramatize the urgency of its moral cause, and some of the dialogue resounds more with the force of

protest than with the ring of truth.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/23/19.) (*In wide release.*)

Le Bonheur

The happiness alluded to in the title of Agnès Varda's 1965 drama of adultery in a working-class Paris suburb stings with whip-lash irony. A handsome couple, François and Thérèse (played by the real-life couple Jean-Claude and Claire Drouot), and their two young children (the actors' own) live a life of old-fashioned sweetness. He's a cabinet-maker and she's a dressmaker; their sex life is active, and their social life is heartwarming. But François falls hard for a pert, uninhibited postal clerk (Marie-France Boyer), bringing drastic change to the domestic order. Varda fills her frames with riots of color and nature—like Bonnard paintings come to life, and with an erotic intimacy to match—and choreographs physical passion with unabashed but formally controlled delight. She also brings abstract forces into view with tactile vigor, offering a sensual sociology of family and workplace rituals. Meanwhile, her witty visual allusions to films by her male New Wave contemporaries serve as both tributes and critiques. In French.—*Richard Brody* (*Lincoln Center, Jan. 4, and streaming.*)

Burning Cane

The nineteen-year-old writer and director Phillip Youmans displays a preternatural maturity in this intimately textured, far-reaching drama, set in rural Louisiana and centered on a middle-aged black woman named Helen (Karen Kaia Livers), who is weary in body and in soul. She lives alone in a house near cane fields, with an ailing dog as her sole companion. Her dissolute husband died of AIDS; her son, Daniel (Dominique McClellan), a heavy drinker who can't hold a job, physically abuses

ON BROADWAY



Even when Laura Linney's characters are flailing or stubborn, they can't help sharing the actress's shrewd intelligence. The daughter of the playwright Romulus Linney, she last appeared on Broadway in 2017, swapping roles night to night with Cynthia Nixon in "The Little Foxes." She returns to Manhattan Theatre Club, this time solo, in "**My Name Is Lucy Barton**," Rona Munro's adaptation of Elizabeth Strout's novel. Linney plays a woman who escaped her impoverished roots in rural Illinois to build a new life as a writer in Manhattan; during a mysterious illness, her mother appears at her hospital bed, dragging her past into her present. The production, starting previews on Jan. 4, at the Samuel J. Friedman, is directed by Richard Eyre.—*Michael Schulman*

his wife, Sherry (Emyri Crutchfield), while nonetheless asserting his right to raise their young son, Jeremiah (Braelyn Kelly). Meanwhile, Helen's friend and pastor, the recently widowed Reverend Tillman (Wendell Pierce), is undergoing a spiritual trial that makes him judgmental and aggressive. Youmans, who does his own cinematography, depicts these harrowing emotional crises in dramatic fragments and shadow-drenched, often oblique images; they suggest his anguish at a legacy of male frustration, violence, rage, and self-destruction that leaves the region's women trapped in a futile silence.—*R.B. (Netflix.)*

Invisible Life

A lengthy, engrossing, and sorrowful fable from Karim Aïnouz, set mostly in Rio de Janeiro. The action begins in the early nineteen-fifties: the air seems rich in sensual and professional promise for the teen-aged Eurídice (Carol Duarte) and her older sister, Guida (Julia Stockler), yet both of them know that the freedoms they crave continue

to hang out of reach. Guida makes a break, fleeing Brazil for foreign lands with a sailor, before returning home—rueful, pregnant, and alone. She is told, wrongly and cruelly, that her beloved Eurídice has likewise gone abroad, and we are confronted, from then on, with the agony and the irony of their never quite managing to meet. Much of the plot, in truth, is hard to believe, yet the film barely suffers as a result; it feels poised, instead, between a fever dream and a fable. In Portuguese.—*A.L. (12/23/19) (In limited release.)*

Just Mercy

This devastatingly affecting drama, based on a true story, reveals outrageous abuses in the justice system—ones that have hardly been redressed. It stars Michael B. Jordan as Bryan Stevenson, from whose memoir it's adapted. A Harvard-trained lawyer, Stevenson moves to a small Alabama town in 1989 to review charges against death-row inmates—most of whom, like him, are black. One of them, Walter McMillian (Jamie Foxx), has been framed for the murder

of a white woman; local law enforcement, prosecution, and the judiciary—all white—reject Stevenson's ironclad exculpatory evidence, and he and his administrative partner, Eva Ansley (Brie Larson), are harassed. The director, Destin Daniel Cretton, conveys the relentless pressure of the threat of execution faced by McMillian and other inmates (many of whom received inadequate counsel)—and of the injustices endured by the region's black residents. While displaying the erratic workings of the law and the crucial importance of journalism, the movie's legal focus narrows its imaginative scope; the drama, though infuriating and moving, sticks to its characters' surfaces.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

Mr. Arkadin

Acting on a tip from a dying man in Naples, Guy Van Stratten (Robert Arden), a small-time grifter with a Flatbush accent, tracks down a feared global potentate, Gregory Arkadin (Orson Welles), who hires him for a sensitive job: to investigate Arkadin himself. The grandee is pained by "a conscience and no memory at all," but his conscience doesn't prevent the bodies from piling up as Van Stratten, trawling the European underworld, unwittingly unleashes the century's political monsters along with Arkadin's own intimate demons. This fractured "Citizen Kane," built of frames within frames and mirrors within mirrors, is aptly brought to life by Welles's later style, born of low budgets and high anxiety, its grotesque closeups and sharp diagonals suggesting worlds and minds askew. In Welles's oracular script, Arkadin, a gleefully orotund storyteller, reveals nothing, but the film's love stories—untender tussles—are sources of bittersweet memories and bad faith: there, Welles, Lear-like though not yet forty, confesses all. Released in 1955.—*R.B. (IFC Center, Jan. 3-5, and streaming.)*

Uncut Gems

Adam Sandler's frantic and fidgety performance as Howard Ratner, a diamond-district jewelry dealer scrambling to stave off calamity, provides the emotional backbone for the brothers Josh and Benny Safdie's recklessly audacious and wildly accomplished blend of crime thriller, family melodrama, and sports drama. Howard, a compulsive gambler, is deep in debt to loan sharks, one of whom (Eric Bogosian) is menacingly insistent. Howard has left his exasperated wife (Idina Menzel) for his employee (Julia Fox) and is trying to set the whole mess aright with the sale of a smuggled stone, in which a distinguished client, the professional basketball player Kevin Garnett (playing himself), takes an interest. The supercharged action—from a script by the Safdies and Ronald Bronstein—ingeniously intertwines real-world sporting events and real-life characters (including the Weeknd) with sharp-eyed scenes from the high-pressure gemstone business, the gambler's tightrope walk, and the habits and rituals of suburban Jewish New Yorkers. The movie's pinball-rapid combinations rise to a frenzied pitch that's exhilarating and awe-inspiring.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

IN REVIVAL



An almost unbearable air of impending doom suffuses Blake Edwards's drama "**Days of Wine and Roses**," from 1962, about a young San Francisco couple's descent into alcoholism. (It screens on Jan. 2 at the Quad.) The story is set in motion with an acute view of the era's sexual politics, particularly in the workplace. Jack Lemmon stars as Joe Clay, a glad-handing public-relations executive who's ashamed of the near-pimping that his corporate clients demand of him. He drowns his misgivings in drink and aggressively coaxes a client's secretary, Kirsten Arnesen (Lee Remick), to join him in giddy oblivion; they rush into a marriage that lurches along on destructive benders, endangering their young daughter (Debbie Megowan) and threatening to drive them apart. The emotional, physical, and financial torments that ravage their existence are matched by humiliations and recriminations that shatter their very personalities, and the abrupt editing of Edwards's shocking images conceals additional horrors that the plot clearly implies; the movie plays like an extended ad for Prohibition, three decades after it ended.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Gotham

12 E. 12th St.

One recent afternoon at the restaurant formerly known as Gotham Bar & Grill, a host led me and a friend to a sort of dais at the back of the gargantuan restaurant, which was nearly empty. Each of the two other tables on our little stage was also occupied by a pair of women, all of whom were wearing beige and sporting haircuts that you might describe—and my friend did—as Park Avenue helmets. We had quipped, on the way, about being “ladies who lunch,” but suddenly it didn’t seem like a joke. The next thing I knew, I was ordering a dish called Chicken Supreme.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have expected different from a restaurant that opened in Greenwich Village more than three decades ago, with the goal of translating uptown-calibre fine dining for a downtown address. In the eighties and nineties, Gotham’s owners sought to class up the neighborhood with white tablecloths and the chef Alfred Portale’s tuna tartare. But they also aimed to minimize stuffiness, to better integrate into the hipper environs. The loftlike dining room felt relatively edgy at the time; Portale’s plating

style was architectural and avant-garde.

Gotham got a new executive chef last spring, the first since Portale, who left to start a restaurant of his own, was hired, in 1984. Victoria Blamey, a forty-year-old native of Chile, made a name for herself by bringing Chumley’s, another vaunted New York institution, into the new millennium. Under Blamey, Gotham’s menu is peppered with exciting and eclectic ingredients that convey an of-the-moment worldliness, including obscure and highly specific strains of fruits and vegetables—Castelfranco, ceci neri, celtuce, curry leaf, calamansi.

Yet the context in which they’re presented doesn’t seem to have changed at all, which is a shame, especially given that the bar for stuffiness has moved significantly lower in the past thirty years. “Bar & Grill” has been dropped from the name, but the dining room, with its yellowed parchment-colored walls and pleated-parachute light fixtures, looks exactly the same, except quite a bit worse for wear. The service is formal and sometimes stiff; more than one dish is finished with a tiny pitcher of sauce or broth, poured tableside for dramatic flourish.

It’s clear that Blamey has interesting ideas, but they feel, for the most part, choked, at odds with the restaurant’s long-held and now outdated identity. The Chicken Supreme may be garnished with makrut lime, but it’s still a boring breast, seared, sliced, and served over a sweet squash purée and beluga lentils. The appealing flavor combination of Brussels sprouts, dates, and tamarind was wasted,

one Friday evening, on a prissy cut of pork called a “porcelet,” a bone-in chop from a milk-fed piglet, which was not particularly flavorful (and, worse, overcooked).

I absolutely loved a small bowl of caraflex cabbage, a cone-shaped variety: the ruffled leaves were at once meltingly tender and crisp-edged, buttery and sweet, crisscrossed with a salty, garlicky seaweed gremolata and hiding pearls of fregola glazed in a tart, fruity burned-onion broth. But I longed to free this down-to-earth dish—priced, astonishingly, at thirty-two dollars—from a menu with its head stuck in clouds of caviar, foie gras (for now) with truffle gelée, and rib eye for two.

I get the sense that Blamey might reach the height of her powers in a more relaxed, unfettered setting, serving her humble, homey pea dal and her shiny-crusted whole-wheat sourdough, flecked with brined pumpkin seeds and black quinoa, to a different kind of crowd. At dinner, the dining room was populated mostly by large parties that seemed to be composed of junior analysts at investment banks, bonding on the company card, or wealthy septuagenarian couples, bragging loudly about how long they’d been eating there and complaining about slow service. (“We want. Our FOOD,” I heard a stately gentleman growl at a hapless busser.) I suppose Gotham has always been, and remains, a place for ladies who lunch. A toast, as Sondheim archly put it, to that invincible bunch. (Dishes \$18–\$55.)

—Hannah Goldfield



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT GOOD OLD DAYS

All times seem to those within them uniquely miserable. Even supposedly halcyon historical moments were horrible if you had to live through them: the eighteen-nineties in London, which now seem a time of wit and Café Royal luxury, were mostly seen then as decadent, if you were no fan of Oscar Wilde's, or as dark and disgraceful, if you were. The allegedly placid American nineteen-fifties were regarded, at the time, as a decade of frightening conformity and approaching apocalypse.

But this does not mean that some moments can't be uniquely miserable. Ours surely is, with the recent collapse of progressive Britain following on the constitutional crisis of liberal America, with so many people around the world caught between political polarities, and with the planet warming daily. No one has ever improved on Yeats's expression of indignation after the Great War: the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity; though in our time the best often share the passionate intensity but can't be heard, because the worst have a smartphone with a Twitter app.

In the midst of such unease, we tend to seek out moments of cheer or just consolation, and suddenly we have found one, in a cave. The cave is in Indonesia—the limestone cave of Leang Bulu' Sipong 4, on the island of Sulawesi, to be precise—and it was occupied, according to recent findings, more than forty thousand years ago, by early mod-

ern humans. Inside it for all that time has been a fourteen-and-a-half-foot-wide image, painted in dark-red pigment, depicting about eight tiny bipedal figures, bearing what look to be spears and ropes, bravely hunting the local wild pigs and buffalo. The discoverers of its antiquity, a team of archeologists at Griffith University, in Australia, including Maxime Aubert, the chief author of an article about the painting in *Nature*, call it "to our knowledge, currently the oldest pictorial record of storytelling and the earliest figurative artwork in the world."

The very first storytelling picture! The first narrative, and it tells one of the simplest and most resonant stories we have: a tale of the hunter and the hunted, of small and easily mocked pursuers trying to bring down a scary but vulnerable beast. What's more, the hunt-

ers appear to be what people whose business it is to decipher cave paintings call therianthropes, humans with animal elements, like heads. These eight, then, are the earliest known examples of this mysteriously durable manner of mythical depiction, which runs forward to Egyptian wall paintings and, for that matter, to modern animation. Therianthropes, it seems, reflect the symbolic practice of giving to humans the powers of animals, a shamanistic rite that seems tied to the origins of religion, and here it is, for the first time, a startup.

The detailed resolution of the images in the *Nature* article is at first disappointing. Though the buffalo, called anoa, are distinct enough, one of the human figures, we're told, has "a tapering profile that possibly merges into the base of a thick tail and with short, curved limbs splayed out to the side. In our opinion, this part of the body resembles the lower half of a lizard or crocodile. It is thus possible that [the therianthrope] represents a composite of at least three different kinds of animals: a human, an anoa and a quadrupedal reptile." To this chimerical composite, one might add the trained eye of an Australian archeologist, which seems necessary to ascertain the full effect.

And yet it's impossible not to feel a shudder of communion with these ancient beings, recounting their hopeful stories of abundance in a time that was, certainly, even more unstable than our own. (We worry daily about the next good leader; they worried daily about the next good meal.) Nor would the storytelling have been the product



of a merely male hierarchy of hunting. The patriarchy had little place in caves. A study sponsored by the National Geographic Society in 2013 suggests that three-quarters of the hand stencils found on the walls of dozens of European caves were made by women, and that the paintings alongside them likely were as well. Early man may have thrown the spears, but early woman made the pictures telling how.

Significant scientific discoveries do two things at once: advance the narrow field of fact and extend the imaginative field of wonder. Thinking of those images unspooling in the dark of a cave brings to mind many metaphors, among them intimations of modern movies. Indeed, the cave painting could be entered as evidence into a key aesthetic and storytelling argument of today—the debate between the paladins of American film, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, and their Marvel Cinematic Uni-

verse contemporaries. Scorsese recently wrote, in the *Times*, that the superhero genre, whatever charms it may have, is degrading cinema by pulling it away from the real world of ambiguity, from the “complexity of people and their contradictory and sometimes paradoxical natures, the way they can hurt one another and love one another and suddenly come face to face with themselves.” Coppola agreed, telling reporters that the Marvel-franchise movies are “despicable” for failing to supply their audience with “some enlightenment, some knowledge, some inspiration.”

Yet our oldest picture story seems to belong, whether we want it to or not, more to the Marvel universe than to Marty Scorsese’s. The therianthropes, with their composite identities, are really the first superheroes, X-Men united on the wall for a fight. A human with the strength of a bull! Another with the guile of a crocodile! Perhaps the deeper

truth is that Scorsese and Coppola are right, in that it takes a huge effort of the disciplined imagination to turn human attention away from daydreams of magical powers to the truth of our contradictory natures. Still, there is no denying our collective relief when the therianthropes arrive to save the day.

Our oldest stories are like our newest; we look for explanation and hope for a happy ending. People, then and now, tell tales about the brave things they are about to do, or just did, or are thinking of doing, or thought they might do, if they were not the people they are but had the superpowers we all wish we had. Our enterprises vary; our entertainments do not. Plans to bring down the hunt and bring home the anoa bacon change; our hopes of getting it done will never alter. It seems a good moral to take us through these difficult days and into the next decade.

—Adam Gopnik

TABLOID FODDER POSTIAN DIASPORA



When news breaks inside the world of the New York *Post*, past or present, it spreads quickly to Post Nation, an e-mail group of more than twelve hundred of the paper’s former and current employees. Myron Rushetzky, once a head city-desk assistant at the *Post*, is in charge. He maintains strict criteria for topics worthy of one of his blasts: births, promotions, book events, honors, and retirements. Also deaths.

Many of Rushetzky’s old colleagues have told their families to notify him as soon as they keel over. In recent years, some of his e-mails have begun ominously, as in “Post Nation, we have lost another one.” When he announced that Carl Pelleck, a cigar-chomping police reporter, had died, many people commented on how Pelleck had helped them when they were rookies. “I got assigned to cover rising milk prices. In Bensonhurst,” JoAnne Wasserman, a former reporter, wrote. “I asked Pelleck how long the subway was from lower Man-

hattan. ‘I think they got it down to 3 days,’ he said.”

Rushetzky, who is sixty-seven years old, is about five feet five and has an intense gaze and thinning gray hair. His trimmed mustache, a look popular when he was a young man, is once again in fashion—or so said the *Post* on October 5th, in a story titled “Millennials Are Bringing Back the Mustache.” He grew up in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, and attended Lafayette High School, where Jeffrey Epstein was in his graduating class. “He did not sign my yearbook,” Rushetzky said the other day, in his one-bedroom co-op in Woodside, Queens. The décor includes Mets memorabilia, a poster for “A Chorus Line,” and relics from Rushetzky’s long career in journalism. In 1974, as a student at City College, he took a side job at the *Post* as a copyboy. He worked there for nearly forty years, and then took a buyout. (He asked that his exit package include a *Post* subscription.)

On display in his apartment is a mock front page—or “wood,” in tabloid parlance—that proclaims, “AFTER TEN YEARS, WE ALL HAVE MYROMANIA.” It dates to 1987, when Rushetzky celebrated a decade as a head city-desk assistant, a pre-Internet position that he describes as being in “the eye of the hur-

ricane.” Reporters would call the desk looking for editors, readers would call to complain, tipsters would phone in story ideas. Rushetzky made plenty of outgoing calls, too, occasionally to sleeping editors when big stories broke in the middle of the night. “I had calluses on my fingers from rotary phones,” he said. Sometimes spouses of *Post* staffers called looking for errant husbands or wives, but Rushetzky is discreet. He knows where the bodies are buried, and many of them still owe him money.

At some point, word got out that, if you needed quick cash, Rushetzky would come through. From a drawer of a roll-top desk in his living room—not far from two urns containing the ashes of his cats, Isabelle and Haley—he retrieved a yellowing piece of paper, on which he’d written the initials of borrowers next to amounts of no-interest loans, mostly from the nineteen-eighties. Repaid loans had been crossed out. Many were for ten or twenty dollars—“In those days, you could get drunk on ten dollars,” he said—while others were larger. The Australian-born *Post* veteran Steve Dunleavy borrowed regularly from the Bank of Myron, but he and Rushetzky had an agreement: if a newspaper strike loomed, Dunleavy would pay him back before it began. “I didn’t realize how many peo-

ple still owe,” Rushetzky said, peering at the paper.

Since leaving the *Post*, in 2013, Rushetzky has been busy with activities such as the Silurians Press Club (an organization of mostly retired journalists), SilverSneakers exercise classes, and Post Nation, which evolved out of Rushetzky’s birthday list. For four decades, he sent birthday and anniversary cards to colleagues, friends, and their children. He bought so many cards that he was known to staff at Hallmark stores—but only those which participated in the Gold Crown program, which offers rewards to frequent buyers. A birthday card that Rushetzky sent to the playwright Lanford Wilson, a drinking buddy from the Lion’s Head bar, is in Wilson’s official archive, at the University of Missouri. Rushetzky always sent a card to Rupert Murdoch, who, Rushetzky noted, was born on March 11th, the same day as Dorothy Schiff, who sold Murdoch the *Post*, in 1976. The boss responded with thank-you notes.

Now Rushetzky sends birthday greetings electronically. On his own birthday, this past summer, Susan Edelman, a current *Post* employee, announced the fact to Post Nation. Good wishes and gratitude flowed in from all over. Warren Hoge, who logged a decade at the *Post* before joining the *Times*, wrote, “Myron—You are truly the national leader we all believe in.”

—Susan Mulcahy

LESS IS MORE DEPT. POST-STRUGGLE



The Swedish poet and novelist Linda Boström Knausgård held up a finger. “Do you hear that buzz?” she asked. “That is the sound of IKEA. We are in Hell and we will never leave.” Boström Knausgård was in New York on a book tour; her second novel, “Welcome to America,” was recently translated into English. The book, despite its title, is set not in the United States but, rather, within the confines of a Stockholm apartment, similar to the one in which Boström Knausgård grew up. While in



Linda Boström Knausgård

town, she visited the Red Hook IKEA—a notional Sweden from whose windows one could see, rising sedately in the rain, the Statue of Liberty.

“Every couple that comes in here starts to fight!” she said, shaking her head. “It’s all the picking out. And in the Marketplace area downstairs, where you find everything yourself—that’s where the real fighting is.” She joined a line of shoppers wending their way through the maze of settees and shower cubbies and office chairs. “Maybe too modern,” she said, sizing up a stainless-steel kitchen. She reached down to touch a coffee table. “The surface is very clean. *That* is Swedish.”

Boström Knausgård, who is forty-seven, was wearing a black blouse tucked into a long black skirt, with black tights and bright-white sneakers. Her hair is dark and short. Her voice—low, melodious—was at odds with her body language: skittish, almost ill at ease. Three years ago, after Boström Knausgård separated from the novelist Karl Ove Knausgård, she moved to Ystad, in the south of Sweden. This past August, her mother, Ingrid, died, and, the week of the funeral, she moved again, this time into a three-bedroom apartment in a Stockholm suburb. (She still hasn’t finished unpacking.)

“Welcome to America” commemorates Ingrid, but it’s complicated. The semi-autobiographical book follows a young girl, Ellen, who stops speaking. Ellen’s mother is a charismatic actress. Ingrid—also an actress—had mixed feelings about the book. “After the thing

with Karl Ove, she was just exhausted with being written about,” the author said. (Karl Ove’s “My Struggle” series described his life—including his marriage to Boström Knausgård, who has bipolar disorder—in long-winded, unsparing detail.) “But my book is different,” she said. “I changed so much. The part where the brother pees in bottles so that he doesn’t have to leave his room? I made that up.” She paused. “Actually, I talked to my brother later, and he once had a job where he had to walk down so many stairs to get to the bathroom that he did pee in bottles. He asked me, ‘How did you know?’”

She stood in a bedroom display—a stage strewn with the articles of intimacy. The careful details, she said, reminded her of her mother. She lingered by an olive-green cabinet. “I want to paint my study this color,” she said. “I don’t think it makes you write better, having your walls be one color or some other color, but the green is calming.”

Later, in the cafeteria, she ordered meatballs with lingonberry sauce. “I feel at home when I eat this,” she said. As a kid, she liked to accompany her mother to rehearsals. Ingrid encouraged her: at nine, Boström Knausgård played one of the von Trapp children in a production of “The Sound of Music,” and she continued to act into her late teens. “During my first year onstage, everything was so easy,” she said. “The second year, I started to look at myself: ‘What am I doing here? Now I have to sing, now I have to say this.’ With this self-critic thing starting, I think it was my first depression.”

She ruminated on her love life. “My Struggle” is six volumes and more than a million words. In that light, “Welcome to America,” with its valorization of silence, its poetic compression, and its slightness—the book is a hundred and sixty pages long—feels pointed. “Things would have been different, I think, if Karl hadn’t gone away into his books,” Boström Knausgård said. “He is really caring about his children, but he was bored being a full-time parent. He thought that he would like it, but he really didn’t. He would act like he was dying when I got home from work. The idea that he could not physically bear to spend time with his baby, that his writing was the only important thing—it hurt me.”

In January, Boström Knausgård will

relocate to London, where her four children live with Karl Ove. Her boyfriend of two years will remain in Sweden, she said, “so this is not easy. We will have to Skype and phone.” The boyfriend is a Chilean songwriter and guitarist. “He comes up to here”—she indicated her shoulder—“and when we first started dating his mother told him, ‘Is she longer than you? She cannot be longer than you!’” (Karl Ove is six-three.) Trying to describe her boyfriend, Boström Knausgård began, “He’s...” She stopped. Then she exclaimed, “He’s nice!” Smiling shyly, she added, “He is considerate. When I am too quiet, he goes, ‘You have to tell me what you’re thinking. I want to know!’”

—Katy Waldman

MIAMI POSTCARD LEGIT



The other day, the artist Shepard Fairey paid a visit to the Wynwood Walls, a cluster of mural-covered buildings in a formerly derelict part of Miami. He first went to the district in 2004, four years before he became famous for creating the graphic poster of Barack Obama’s face and the word

“HOPE.” “There was nothing here,” Fairey said. He wore Chuck Taylors, and a jacket embellished with band pins: Black Flag, the Ramones. “It was warehouses, some tags, and some people who looked strung out.”

In 2009, the real-estate developer Tony Goldman asked him to create a mural for a building he’d just bought in Miami. Fairey painted figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese politician, and his own wife, Amanda, on the building. After Goldman died, in 2012, Fairey returned to paint a new mural, of men whom the developer had admired. Now the wall is covered with the faces of David Bowie, Miles Davis, Andy Warhol, and the Dalai Lama. “Sometimes people ask, ‘Why aren’t there any women in it?’” Fairey said. “The first one was almost all women, and I didn’t think about the fact that this mural was gonna last way longer.”

A Citibank awning juttied out from a mural announcing, “Hello, Beautiful!” Workers strung lights near a makeshift bar. Fairey’s solo show “Facing the Giant: 3 Decades of Dissent” would open that night in one of Wynwood’s galleries. “A lot of people want to enjoy what a place like this has to offer, but they don’t want to look at a logo,” he said, regarding an installation of bottles of Don Julio tequila, one of the opening-night sponsors. “They dismiss things so superficially: ‘Oh, Nike underwrote that, so that delegitimizes the entire venture.’ Like,

you’re not in control of your own behavior after you see a logo?”

Logos have defined Fairey’s career. As a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, he screen-printed posters with the word “OBEY”—now the name of his clothing company—and the face of Andre the Giant, and plastered them all over Providence. He also made stickers. “You see the Andre sticker once, it’s silly and absurd, and maybe you just ignore it,” he said. “Then you see it in five more places around town, and it really starts to nag at you.” He studied Heidegger’s theory of phenomenology—“Basically, the idea that people have become numb to their surroundings and view things in a hazy, muted way”—and the Situationists, who posted Marxist quotes around Paris during the 1968 student protests. In 1990, Fairey wrote a manifesto titled “The Social and Psychological Explanation of Andre the Giant Has a Posse.” (He later renamed it “The Manifesto”—“snappier,” he said.) It explained that his art had no meaning and was designed merely to provoke a reaction. “The intellectual framework for it wasn’t just to justify my mischief,” he said. It was to make his stuff go viral.

He also gave his work to select collectors—“friends who were skateboarders, punk rockers, into hip-hop.” They’d slap the stickers on their gear. “Others would see it and go, ‘I don’t know what that is, but the right kind of people with the right vibe are representing it.’”

Having graduated from exhibiting on the outsides of buildings to inside them, Fairey has a lot of stuff to sell. A gallery across from the Citi Lounge had dozens of original Fairey art works on the walls, priced between five thousand and fourteen thousand dollars. The Obama “HOPE” poster was not among them.

“Everybody knows it,” Fairey said. “It doesn’t need to be in here.” The poster made his career, but creating it wasn’t an entirely positive experience. He ended up in multiple lawsuits with the Associated Press (the source of the photograph he used for his rendering), and in 2012 he was sentenced to two years probation and ordered to pay a fine of twenty-five thousand dollars for destroying and fabricating legal documents—actions that he now calls “shameful and embarrassing.” Of the over-all project, he said, “It was probably a net negative for me.



“I wish I’d spent more time arguing about ‘Star Wars’ online.”

The emotional and financial cost was really extreme.”

He wandered outside and ran into the artist Tristan Eaton, who was checking on a mural he’d painted two years ago (a red-white-and-blue collage of women’s faces, called “American Power”). “The paint’s held up nice, given all the sun it gets,” Eaton said.

“Did they clear-coat it?” Fairey asked.

“They must have,” Eaton said. They discussed how reds are always the first colors to fade. Both men live in L.A., and Eaton sometimes comes to Fairey’s studio to make stencils with Fairey’s laser cutter. “His brain and his laser cutter are both very luxurious things to have access to,” Eaton said.

“I charge three cents for my two cents,” Fairey joked. In the age of hundred-and-twenty-thousand-dollar bananas, there are better ways to make a buck.

—Sheila Marikar

STAGEFRIGHT DEPT. RUN-THROUGH



The standup comedian Maria Bamford sat down in a Brooklyn coffee shop and waited for someone with the Twitter handle @nugget_queen_ to join her. “I’m always terrified to meet the person,” she said. “I look at their Twitter feed and I think, Oh, boy, I don’t know. Because you cannot tell from someone’s social media what they’re going to be like in person. You just can’t.”

Bamford, who was in town for four shows at the Bell House, is known for her jittery, surreal monologues about mental illness, and suffers from a combination of self-proclaimed laziness and performance anxiety, which can make it difficult for her to rehearse. In 2018, she began issuing periodic invitations, on Twitter, for fans who live in cities where she is appearing to meet her for coffee and listen to her run through her set before she performs. The previous evening, she had posted such an invitation, noting, “As always, there will be victual and bev.”

A young woman waved furiously at

Bamford through the window. “Oh, hi!” Bamford called. @nugget_queen_ was Lena Ceretto, who had described herself in her response as a “twenty-two year old nanny slash NYU dropout.” She had been making a collage when she saw Bamford’s tweet. (Bamford almost always selects the first person to reply. “Except once, in Florida, it was somebody who was ‘Go Trump’ and ‘Make America Great Again,’” she said. “I know we’re all human beings, but I felt like that would be a hard one.”)

Ceretto had brought two Polaroid cameras. “Can I hug you?” she asked Bamford. “I was almost on time, but then I forgot my psych meds.”

She ordered a croissant, and Bamford started her set. “So, uh . . . hello, Brooklyn!” she began. The espresso machine shrieked.

When Bamford is addressing one person, her comedic style—a childlike speaking voice intercut with squawks, growls, and a sultry baritone—both softens and intensifies. She taped her 2012 comedy special, “The Special Special Special!,” with only her parents for an audience, in her living room. A 2017 documentary, “Old Baby,” follows her as she does her act before audiences of gradually increasing size: first to her reflection in a mirror, then to her husband, then to a group of neighbors on a sidewalk bench, and, finally, to a packed theatre. At the Brooklyn coffee shop, she occasionally directed her rapid-fire patter into the middle distance. Outside the window, a family in matching puffer coats peered at her.

Bamford was wearing a velour sweater and big sparkly earrings, her blond hair streaked with pink highlights. Because of the medications she takes, she has a tremor. (“Weakness is the brand!” she shouted during her show the next evening, holding out her quivering fingers.) Eight years ago, when Bamford was forty-one, she suffered a series of breakdowns and hospitalizations. Afterward, she wasn’t sure if she’d work again. She’d previously made comedy about the difficulty of maintaining equilibrium on the psychological margins; a 2007 scripted Web series, “The Maria Bamford Show,” depicted her, after a fictional breakdown, moving back in with her parents in Duluth. “It was my worst fear,” she said. “Then it ended up happening.”

In her latest sets, she treats the stability that she’s found since then as a kind of Pyrrhic victory. “I don’t have any new stuff” about mental illness, she tells her audiences. “I thought maybe I should worry about that. But then I remembered: I’m on antipsychotics, and it’s no longer possible for *me! To! Worry!*”

The run-through concluded with a warbling song about coping with loved ones. (“We’re all menopausal! We just had tequila! Let’s change the subject!”) Ceretto applauded.

Bamford explained that the one-person coffee-shop show was not all that different from online dating. (Be-



Maria Bamford

fore meeting her husband, in 2012, she went on “at least seventy” online dates.) Dating apps, she said, “kind of helped me go, ‘Oh, people are just going to show up and be pleasant.’” Generally, the volunteers’ reactions have been positive. “I did have one where the guy noticeably did not laugh at all,” she said. “But he himself was nice.”

Ceretto confided to Bamford that she wanted to try standup comedy herself. “I have jokes written down in my notes app,” she said. “It’s O.K. if I do just, like, five to seven minutes, right?”

“Oh, they won’t let you do more than three,” Bamford said.

“I feel like we’re going to do that thing where we talk and talk and never say goodbye,” Ceretto said.

“Oh, no, we’re good,” Bamford said, and stood up.

—Lizzie Feidelson

GRIEF

A writer reckons with loss.

BY V. S. NAIPAUL



My father was forty-five or forty-six when he had a heart attack. This trouble with his heart was surprising, since for all the years we had known him as children his trouble was his stomach and his indigestion, requiring bottles and bottles of a particular brand of medicinal stomach powder, which he never had the foresight to buy when he was all right, preferring instead during a crisis to send his children on the long walk to the local pharmacy for the powder.

A couple of years after this heart trouble, my father was put on half pay by the *Trinidad Guardian*, the newspaper for which he worked. I was in school in England when this happened, and I worried about the effect of this half pay on my family; things had been bad enough

on my father's full pay. But my father, now near the end of things, was possessed by a strange lightness of spirit. It was as though the heart illness, officially recognized by doctors and the newspaper, gave full expression and an extra validity to the unhappiness he had felt for years, with the *Guardian*, with my mother's family, with his poverty, with prejudice and the British Empire and the unhappy state of India, and with many other things; and it was no longer necessary now for him to go over any of the points.

In this strange lightness of spirit that possessed him, my father turned to the writing of comic short stories. He had been writing stories for more than a decade; he loved journalism, but to be a proper writer was his great ambition,

and in 1943 he had brought out a little book of his early stories. His subject was local Indian life; he wrote more particularly, and with great love, about Indian ritual. His style in these early stories was based on Pearl Buck and "The Good Earth." This Biblical style, and the semi-religious nature of the stories, appeared to isolate the Indian community from the rest of island life, and I feel now that my father stuck to this way of writing because it was easier for him, easier to deal with one community, one set of values, and to people his Biblical landscape. To introduce others would have been to complicate matters, as I myself was to find out later, when I began to write. Now, however, he became bolder; his view became broader, it took in more of the island, and he began to look for comedy, which he hadn't done before.

These comic stories were among his best, and almost everything he wrote in this mood was accepted by the BBC for the "Caribbean Voices" literary program. So it happened that at the end of his life, and when he was on half pay, and half an invalid, my father began to make a little money from his stories.

"Caribbean Voices" asked me to read one of the stories for them. The fee was four guineas. This was more or less the fare from Oxford to London. I was delighted that the story was accepted, and happy to do the reading. But when I wrote my father I made rather too much about the cost of the journey from Oxford. He apologized, though he had nothing to apologize for. The failing was mine, taking away a little of his pleasure in the modest success of his story. His letter made me regret my thoughtlessness—it was no more than that, fealty, but it drove him to spend a little of the very little money that he had on a gift for me. He bought me, with some remnant of his nationalist feeling, an Indian brass vase. The grandeur of his sentiment was frustrated by the gift itself. It was too heavy and awkwardly shaped to entrust to the post office. I don't think my father had realized how difficult his gift was, and what trouble he would have getting it to me.

His solution was to pass the vase to a branch of his family. They worked in London (that migration, of which they were pioneers, had already begun), and

they were richer and more adventurous than people close to us. The idea was that someone from that adventurous family branch might, in his own sweet time, on a trip to London, take that awkwardly shaped vase over and pass it to me.

It was an arrangement that meant I might have to wait quite a while for my father's gift to get to me. My father, his grand gesture made, appeared resigned to whatever might happen. In Oxford I waited, losing faith in the brass vase.

One day, a telegram came for me from London. *Bad news come now.* It was from the people with the vase. It couldn't have been more brutal. But some instinct for drama, some wish to serve death in a correct way, had made them send a telegram. I knew that the bad news was the death of my father. It could be no one else. Still, during the journey up to London, on the four-pound train, I tried in my cruellest way, and always in vain, to imagine other family members who might have died and whose death might have warranted the sending of a telegram.

By the time I got to London, grief—amazingly unknown till then, though I was twenty-one—had taken me over.

The house was in the Paddington area, off the Harrow Road. There was no ceremony of welcome, not because of the death, I felt, but more (though I hardly knew London) because of the cheerlessness of the area. The death was not easy to talk about, and while this stiff conversation was going on I saw on a shelf what I felt sure was my father's brass vase. It was unpolished, without a shine, looking rather neglected. A dry flower stalk—a piece of homemaking abandoned and gone bad—added to the feeling of neglect. The vase had been taken over by the house, without regard or relish, and I wondered, while we talked, how I might ask about it. A good part of me would have felt relieved not to have to ask at all.

When I did ask, as casually as I could, whether the vase came from my father, the people in the house, to my surprise, surrendered without a fight. They said they had been puzzled by the vase, which had come in someone's luggage. Now that I had told them that it was my father's, and he had sent it to me, they said they were relieved. All at once they became nice in my eyes. They put it in

a carrier bag for me. I didn't look at the vase—I wished to match their coolness—and it was only later, on the train, between Paddington and Reading, that I took it out and considered it in the dim railway light.

In shape it was classical, like an urn, wide at the mouth and at the base; and though the idea had immediately to be put aside, it might have been used for human ashes. There was no decoration on the outside, no roses, no arabesques. The goldsmith or silversmith had been content to make plain dashes, so to speak, with his chisel, and these dashes had been allowed to make patterns.

The vase stayed with me for years. I drew it often, and sometimes attempted—more difficult, this—to render it in watercolor. Because of this detached study, it became in the end only an object, without associations; the grief of which it once spoke so directly was rubbed away, like the grief itself, though that stayed with me so completely and for so long, waiting to be recalled, that I was able, some years later, during the writing of my first novel, a comedy, very light (but full of anxiety for me), to transfer much of the episode (beginning with the telegram) to that quite different book, in a concealment and sublimation of grief.

This period of disturbance took me through to the end of my time at Oxford. I had now to leave, go into the unknown, and somehow seek to get started as a writer. The many anxieties I lived with helped to push grief away. I felt I had been inoculated against grief. I had drunk that bitterness to the dregs, and since human beings have limited capacity I didn't think I would be able to do so again.

The months and years passed. Thirty years passed. I wrote many books; I became a writer. My serenity was like a permanent condition. I became more and more removed from that awful journey to London, and in the moments when I thought of it I didn't think grief could come near me again.

It was a poor way of thinking. We are never finished with grief. It is part of the fabric of living. It is always waiting to happen. Love makes memories and life precious; the grief that comes to us is proportionate to that love and is inescapable.

This grief has its own exigencies. We

can never tell beforehand for whom we will feel grief. I never thought, after all I had suffered for my father, that I would be laid low, and almost in the same way, by my younger brother. He was not close to me. He wished to appear to be making his own way. I had to let him go, and I got used to the distance.

One morning, thirty years after the death of my father, my telephone rang. It was my brother's wife. I asked, in the common way of courtesy, "What news?" She said, "Bad news, I'm afraid. Shiva's dead." It did not surprise me. He was a drinking man, and I had seen death on his face the previous year, at the funeral of my younger sister. People there had talked about his worrying appearance. They had tried to get him to see a doctor (there were two in the family), but he had always refused. The appearance of impending death was more noticeable on him in a television appearance a few days later—so noticeable, in fact, I wondered whether the television people had not been worried by it.

So I was not surprised by the news of his death. The pain built up on the railway journey to London. By the time we were passing through Wimbledon (an ugly terrace in the railway cutting), I could recognize from old, even ancient, experience that, surprised though I was, grief had returned to possess me. I had no idea how long it was going to last.

The first symptom of grief that day was an inability to eat. It was new to me. It made my grief concrete, and it lasted all week, disappearing only after the cremation. One of the attendants at the crematorium, just before the coffin rolled away to be consumed, invited me to place my hand on the coffin. The rites of death were completely new to me; this was the comfort that many before me had instinctively sought. It didn't work for me. The coffin was a coffin; below my hand, wood was wood.

Shiva's wife, speaking of the funeral arrangements earlier in the week, had mentioned the chapel of rest, where Shiva at some time was to lie. But the undertaker's careful words which she was using called up fearful pictures: I couldn't go to that chapel.

That week of waiting for the cremation I spent reading the first of Shiva's books. I did so in a state of exaltation. It is perhaps how all writers

should be read, if we are to seize their essence and understand what the writing meant to them. There was, unexpectedly, a description of our father's funeral, thirty-two years before; it was shot through with emotion, and taught me in some ways how to deal with Shiva's own occasion.

Afterward, at tea in Shiva's flat, I talked to my elder sister Kamla. We talked about Shiva as a child; we remembered how, shortly after we had moved to our own house, he had once swallowed a plum and had begun seriously to choke. Fortunately, our house was next door to a doctor's office, and he was in attendance that afternoon. He swiftly attended to the matter. It was a small crisis, but we could still, my sister and I, after all these years, celebrate the little boy's escape from death, as though it were something final.

I said to Kamla, expecting some solace from her, "And now we have nothing."

She said, "And now we have nothing."

My sorrow lasted for two years. For two years I mentally dated everything, even the purchase of a book, by its distance from Shiva's death.

Nadira was living in Bahawalpur, in Pakistan. One day, she saw a cat on the window ledge of her room. It was looking into the room in a disquieting way, and she told the servant to get rid of the cat. He misunderstood and killed

the poor creature. Not long after this, in a laundry basket near the window, Nadira found a tiny kitten who was so young that its eyes were still closed. She understood then that the poor creature that had been so casually killed was the mother of the little kitten, who was probably the last of the litter. She thought she should adopt him. The kitten slept in her bed, with Nadira and her two children. He received every attention that Nadira could think of. She knew very little about animals, and almost nothing about cats. She must have made mistakes, but the kitten, later the cat, repaid the devotion with extraordinary love. The cat appeared to know when Nadira was going to come back to the house. It just turned up, and it was an infallible sign that in a day or two Nadira herself would return.

This happy relationship lasted for seven or eight years. Nadira decided then to leave the city and go and live in the desert. She took the cat with her, not knowing that a cat cannot easily change where it lives: all the extraordinary knowledge in its head, of friends and enemies and hiding places, built up over time, has to do with a particular place. A cat in a new setting is half helpless. So it turned out here.

She came back one day to her desert village and found the people agitated. They had a terrible story. A pack of wild desert dogs had dragged away the unfortunate cat into a cane field. Nadira looked, fruitlessly, and was al-

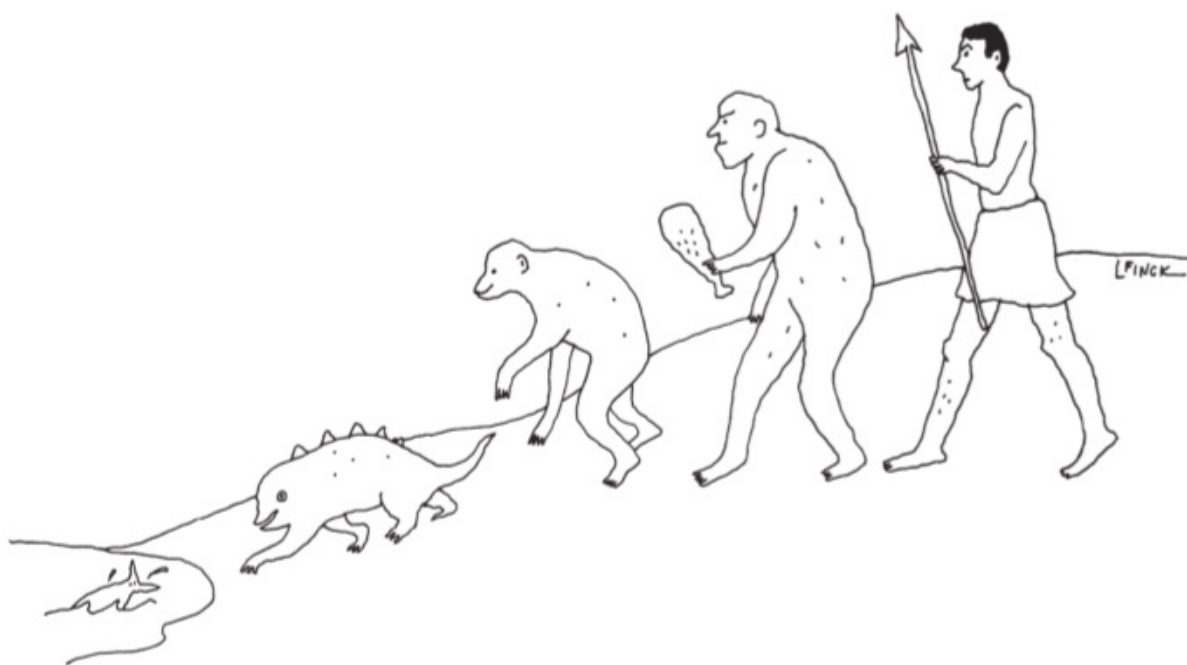
most glad that she couldn't find her cat. It would have been an awful sight: the wild dogs of the desert would have torn the cat to pieces. The cat was big, but the desert dogs were bigger, and the cat would have had no chance against a ravening pack. If it had got to know the area better, the cat might have known how to hide and protect itself. The dogs were later shot dead, but that revenge couldn't bring back the cat whom she had known as the tiniest kitten, motherless, in the laundry basket. Grief for that particular cat, whose ways she knew so well, almost like the ways of a person, never left her.

And it was only when she came to live with me in Wiltshire—a domesticated landscape, the downs seemingly swept every day: no desert here, no wild dogs—that she thought she could risk having another cat, to undo the sorrow connected with the last.

She went to the Battersea rescue home. In one cage she saw a very small black-and-white kitten, of no great beauty. Its nose was bruised and it was crying. It was being bullied by the bigger cats in the cage. It was the runt of its litter and had been found in a rubbish bin, where it had been thrown away. Everything about this kitten appealed to Nadira. And this was the kitten that, after the Battersea formalities, two friends, Nancy Sladek and Farrukh Dhondy, brought to us.

The kitten was absolutely terrified. It had had an up-and-down life for many days and had no idea what was coming next. It tried now to run away, though there was no place for it to run to. It dug its little claws into the screen door and raced up to the ceiling of the utility room. That was as far as it could go, and I reached up and brought him down. Something extraordinary then happened. It was as though, feeling my hand, he felt my benignity. He became calm, then he became content; he was happy to be in my hand (not much bigger than him), so that in a few seconds, guided by a cat's instinct alone, he moved from terror to trust. He ran up my arm to my shoulder; when I introduced him to some of my lunchtime guests, he sought to do the same with them. I knew nothing about cats. But he was easy to like.

I was asked if he had already been



GOING BACK FOR THE HOLIDAYS

given a name. He hadn't, but there was one that came easily to mind: Augustus, not because it was a proper cat's name but because to anyone with a little knowledge of Roman history it fitted. He had been nervous at the beginning; then he had been confident. But some little element of caution remained. When I took him in my arms—really so very small—to walk him around the house plot, he seemed to forget his earlier playful character; some extraordinary instinct made him tremble with panic when I got too close to the boundary of my plot, though he hardly knew the place. It was another demonstration of the mystery and wonder of cats.

The local vet said, "Cats are rewarding."

That was reassuring, but when I went to the pet shop in Salisbury, to find out a little more, I was cast down. The shop was full of goods I as yet knew nothing of, and had a smell, not a disagreeable one, a little like the smell that came from the old-fashioned shops of the wholesale merchants in central Port of Spain selling (among other things) brown sugar in jute sacks, the sacks set in the shop doorways, full of flies and bees, the sugar turning liquid in the heat and in a few places oozing through the sacking.

It didn't take me long to understand that around this simple love of cats was a whole culture I knew nothing about and would have to master before cats could become fully rewarding. I needed to know about their sanitary needs; I needed to know about litter trays. I needed to know about their food. There was a gadget here that claimed to divide a cat's food for the day into four portions, keeping all the portions refrigerated and at a fixed time releasing one chilled portion for a lucky cat. Would I be able to get that thing to work? At the end of this knowledge, if it ever came, there were the cat toys which this shop had in abundance: the other side of the grimness of cat life, the little balls, the lengths of string. That first afternoon in the pet shop, I doubted that I would win through to the toys and games.

But, with Nadira's encouragement, I persevered, and soon I was able, with delight, to follow Augustus's development. I loved to see him sleeping. I loved to see him stretch (pressing down on

his legs, his body curved) when he got up. I loved to see him trotting in grass half as high as he was. He jumped beautifully, assessing the height of the barrier and the narrowness of the ledge that was to receive him. He was a terrific runner; he liked to pretend there was some pursuer behind him, and as he ran he often looked back at this phantom pursuer. These athletic gifts came to him when he was very young, hardly out of kittenhood. I assumed they would be with him forever. It never occurred to me that gifts that had matured so quickly would fade in the same way; I never thought that Augustus's old age would be marred by arthritis.

But with cats, so brief is their span, every sign of vigor invariably comes with a foreshadowing of decay. Cats, they say, have nine lives, and even in those early days Augustus began to expend his lives. His very first life would have been when, only a few days old, he was thrown away in a dustbin. His second, in our house, was when, having no tutor, no cat he might imitate, he ate or began to eat a mole, and poisoned himself. Feeling death approaching, he ran away from the house, in order to die in the dignity of solitude. This was new to me. I knew it only from a fading memory of French poetry from the sixth form: in the poem by Vigny, this was how the wolf suffered and died, without speaking. It was extraordinary to have this poetic grandeur replicated by little Augustus, so small, so young, and on my own doorstep, so to speak.

He had travelled far on that hard journey which he must have intended to be his last. He had instinctively followed the line of the hedge, which would have concealed him, all the way down to the river. It was as though with what remained of his intelligence and strength he wished now to drown himself. He was at the end of his tether when we found him. He allowed himself to be coaxed back into our hands. He was crying with pain, making a terrible mewing sound. We took him to the house, and the vet came and cured him in no time with modern medicine. Without the medicine he would not

have been cured. So he had his luck; with medicine (and a vet always on hand), over the next ten years, he had his many lucky lives.

If we had known more about cats, we might have spared him some of those lives, or we might at any rate have helped to lengthen some of them. We would not, if we had known, have entrusted him to the care of a kindly person who knew as little about cats as we did. She,

who had taken over Augustus from us for a few days, very soon found herself in the position we had been in. She had to go away and didn't quite know what to do with Augustus. What followed was awful. She had a friend who had, or kept, many cats, perhaps even professionally. It was to that house that Augustus was

taken; and so it happened that he, who had had such a bad start in life, was now, after the merest taste of freedom, given a new idea of his destiny.

Among the cats in this new house was one who was infected with a bad virus. He took against Augustus, and Augustus had no one to protect him. The Augustus who came back to us was noticeably different from the cat who had left us. His fur was in a bad way, and he was clearly unwell. The kindly woman who had offered to look after him knew that there was something wrong. She thought she should give the fur a shine, to suggest health. She rubbed Augustus down with what might have been hair oil. This gave him an unnatural appearance and made him look iller than ever. He hated whatever had been rubbed on his fur, and even after he came back to us was trying to lick it off.

The vet took Augustus's mauling seriously. He thought he should give Augustus a blood test and took him off to his surgery for the night. I never liked the idea of surrendering Augustus to the surgery. Augustus never liked being in the surgery; his paws sweated with fear. But this was an emergency. When he came back he looked ravaged. A patch of fur under his neck was shaved off. That was where the blood had been drawn for the test, and it seemed to me that he would never be whole again,



that this process of decay would now never be reversed.

More alarming was the vet's diagnosis. The virus that Augustus had been infected with was a form of feline AIDS. The words were awful; they gave the imagination free rein. It happened, though, that I was in touch with a neurologist in the United States. Purely by chance he telephoned about this time. I told him about Augustus and he was amused. Many cats, he said, had feline AIDS, and they often managed to live. We needed just this little encouragement, and that was how, until the very end, we lived with Augustus, looking after him, with the help of the vet, as best we could. Most of our memories of him—trotting, running, always playful—date from this time; we put the idea of his death away from us, and it seemed finally not to matter.

We had over the years developed the painful idea—not with us at the beginning—that Augustus, as a cat, for all the beauty of his bearing, lived close to the dangers that we had got to know about from living with him: prowling farm cats, prowling foxes and wild animals. But Augustus, when things were going well with him, appeared not to share our anxiety. He seemed instead then willing to provoke trouble. He liked walking up to the farm and considering the farm cats from a safe distance. If they turned nasty, he was able to walk sedately down the lane, swinging his hips.

We were nervous about moonlight. In the full moon everything showed on the down, and it seemed to us that Augustus could make himself an easy target if he went out. But that was precisely when Augustus, with his own hunting instincts revived, wanted to go out, and he could be so insistent that sometimes, in spite of what we had been told by the vet, we let him out, trusting to his canniness to keep him safe. It was terrible then for us, waiting for him to come back, and listening for the cat flap, which would tell us that he was back and safe. It was hard for me to sleep until I heard the cat flap open and shut.

On a brilliant August night he was let out. He didn't come back in the night. He came back in the morning, and then, before he could be restrained, he went out again. He was pushing his luck too far. He had come back safely

from his long night trip; his canniness had served him well. But on this morning trip he was badly hurt, and he never really recovered.

It was his habit when he was hurt on one of his jaunts to rest somewhere, get

his strength back, and then make the painful journey to the house. Some time would have passed since his accident, but he couldn't be said to have recovered his strength. His hindquarters were collapsing below him; he couldn't bear

FROM THE CATALOGUE OF CRUELTY

Once, I slapped my sister with the back of my hand.
We were so small, but I wanted to know

how it felt: my hand raised high across
the opposite shoulder, slicing down like a trapeze.

Her face caught my hand. I'd slapped her in our
yellow room with circus animals

on the curtains. I don't remember
how it felt. I was a rough child.

I said *No*. I said *These are my things*.
I was speaking, usually, of my socks:

white, athletic, thin and already gray
on the bottom, never where I left them.

I was speaking of my fists raining down
on my brother's back. My sister's. Socks.

In the fourth grade, in California,
I kicked Charles in the testicles. At that school,

we played sock ball: hit the red playground ball
with the sides of our hands and ran the bases.

I kicked Charles with the top of my foot, caught him
in the hinge of ankle. I wanted to see

what would happen. I didn't believe
anything could hurt like it did on TV.

Charles folded in half at the crease of his waist.
My god, I was a rough child, but I believed

Charles, that my foot turned him to paper.
Later, I kicked my dad the same way,

but he did not crumple. It was summer
in Arkansas. What humidity,

these children, full of water. I hit him
also with the frying pan. I hit him

also with the guitar. We laughed later:
Where had the guitar come from? My dad

was a star collapsing. The first thing
a dying star does is swell, swallows

whatever is near. He tried to take us
into his body, which was the house

the police entered. This is how I knew
he was dying. I'd called the police.

What is your name? He tried to put us through
the walls of the house the police entered,

which was his body. *What is your name?*
Compromised: the integrity of a body

contracting. *What is your name, sir?* He answered:
Cronos. He answered: *I'm hungry.* He answered:

A god long dead. He threw up all his children
right there on the carpet. After all,

we were so small, the children. The thing
about a star collapsing is that it knows

neither that it is a star nor in collapse.
Everything is stardust, everything essential.

What is your name? Everything is resisting
arrest. Its gravity crushes the children

and the cruiser's rear passenger window.
The officer didn't know the star's name.

White dwarf? Black hole? To see: throw the collapsing
star face first into anything. Face first

into the back seat. Face first into the pepper
spray. Face first onto the precinct lawn.

Did you know you could throw a star? Do you
understand gravity, its weaknesses?

*You are in my house. You should already
know my name.*

—Donika Kelly

to be touched there, and the vet's nurses,
standing in for the vet, but not as skilled
as the vet, caused him to cry out. He
had received a bad kick from a man or
an animal; the feeling in the end was
that no man was responsible, but that

Augustus had gone among the steers in
the neighboring field, themselves await-
ing slaughter, and had frightened them.

The vet came the next day and gave
Augustus two injections, one to deal
with his pain, the other to boost his

strength. The effect was marvellous. Au-
gustus bounded up the staircase in a
way he hadn't done for years. It was as
though he had shed his arthritis, and
had become a kitten again. It was too
good to last, and it didn't. The injection
wore off in a day and Augustus was
again limping up the stairs, step by step.

The vet said he would come again
in four weeks. What he didn't tell us
was what he told a neighbor. She knew
about cats and she thought Augustus
was in a bad way. She asked the vet how
much time he gave Augustus. He said
six months. I was glad he didn't tell us
that. It would have made Augustus's last
few weeks with us unbearable; would
have appeared to mock all we were doing
to put Augustus on his feet again.

And so for a little while the vet con-
tinued to come, every four weeks, as he
had said, Augustus appearing to revive
after each visit, but then relapsing into
his increasingly bemused state, his intel-
ligence and physical sharpness now things
of the past. It seemed wrong for Augus-
tus to be so dependent on the vet's nee-
dle, which previously he had hated. But
we had got used to Augustus's decline,
and were not as shocked as we should
have been; we believed in the magic of
the vet's medicine, and it was easy for us
now to live with the hope that one day
that decline would be reversed and Au-
gustus would be himself again.

Stage by stage we watched him go
down. He liked to drink water from the
bathtub taps, but it happened now that
after the effort of getting into the tub he
forgot why he was there, and was con-
tent to stay crouched, doing nothing. The
day came when we noticed he had stopped
eating. A little while after this discovery
we noticed that he had begun to eat or
nibble at the litter in his tray. This un-
naturalness was very depressing; it seemed
to come from a creature far away from
us and horribly alone. An item on the
Internet told us that this kind of behav-
ior befell cats who had suffered from what
we interpreted as feline AIDS; it was a
form of anemia. This was what we told
the vet on the telephone. He was reas-
suring, even jolly. He said that a jab every
three months would deal with that.

We spoke to the vet on the telephone
on Friday. He promised to come on Mon-
day morning at nine. I would have liked
him to come sooner. But the weekend

was the weekend, and I couldn't press. Augustus was now supine and forlorn, still not eating, and I wondered how he would manage till Monday. With his old instinct to hide and die he had crept below a bed, but having got below the bed, and feeling protected by it, he didn't know what else to do. He remained standing; it looked odd. Nadira crept below the bed to talk to him; we had no means of knowing how much this meant to him. Nadira went below the bed again in the morning to talk to him.

I thought much about his going below the bed. It was his last independent act; it required strength and foresight to jump over or negotiate the horizontal metal strut.

Ever since I had telephoned the vet I had been mentally marking off the hours before he arrived. The arrival of the vet was, in my mind, the moment of medicine and magic; this was what had happened many times before. It never occurred to me that I had really been marking off Augustus's final hours.

The vet and his nurse came a few minutes after nine. Normally, when the vet came, Augustus had to be chased and shut in, to keep him in the room. Now none of that was needed; he simply followed when he was called, with expressionless eyes. Normally the vet was reassuring, with some words about Augustus's ability to surprise him; when he was in that mood he sometimes called Augustus "his lordship." Now he was altogether more sombre. He made no jokes. He said with an unusual bluntness that Augustus had gone downhill. He put a finger in Augustus's mouth (something we hadn't done) and said Augustus had an ulcer. That could be dealt with, but Augustus (because of his viral infection) was at that stage of decay where if it wasn't one illness it would be another.

We told him that Augustus hadn't eaten for two days. He considered that and then appeared to consider poor, wasted Augustus again. He said, and his words sounded brutal, "He's living off his tissue." It was awful to think that while he was with us, and nibbling at his litter, this had happened to him.

In this way, with half-expressed thoughts, we arrived at the fearful conclusion that Augustus had to be put down, and the sooner the better. To put it off to next week was to create a greater

problem, the vet said; Augustus might then have to be kept alive on a drip.

The kindly vet hadn't come prepared for this drastic action. I suppose he had come on that Monday morning still thinking about the anemia we had read about on the Internet and passed on to him. He hadn't brought the chemicals that were necessary to put Augustus down. He and his nurse went back to the surgery to get those chemicals. They didn't take long. Augustus stayed where he was, watching and waiting and not understanding. It didn't take me long to decide that Augustus was to be on my lap for the final act of his life. Nadira had no wish to witness any part of this act.

I sat on a tall chair. A woman who worked for me put Augustus on my knees. A little later, she put a chewed-up towel (one of Augustus's toys) between Augustus and my knees. (Whether she did this to comfort Augustus or to save my trousers I don't know.) Augustus, as once before, had to be given two injections: the first was to send him to sleep; the second was to take away his life.

The vet took a little of his fur away from one of his front paws. The needle went into that cleared area. Augustus gave the merest response, hardly a cry. The front paw noticeably relaxed. I stroked him between the eyes, moving downward from his forehead. It was how I used to stroke him when he was a kitten, and I did so to remind him, as I hoped, of his mother's licks. But I had little faith in what I was doing at this late stage of his life. I asked the vet whether Augustus, half doped, would have some idea of my stroking him. He said he thought he would, and this comforted me.

I stroked him between the eyes until the vet said he had fallen asleep.

The second liquid, the one that would put an end to Augustus, was a virulent blue, and there seemed to be a lot of it in the syringe. The vet applied it and appeared to apologize for the length of time it took. I suppose he meant that a more humane chemical would work more quickly. I didn't think it took long. Quite soon the vet said it was over. Augustus was still warm and heavy on my legs.

Good manners now took over from whatever emotion we felt. I said to the vet, "You've looked after him all his life."

The vet said (I believe), "It was a pleasure."

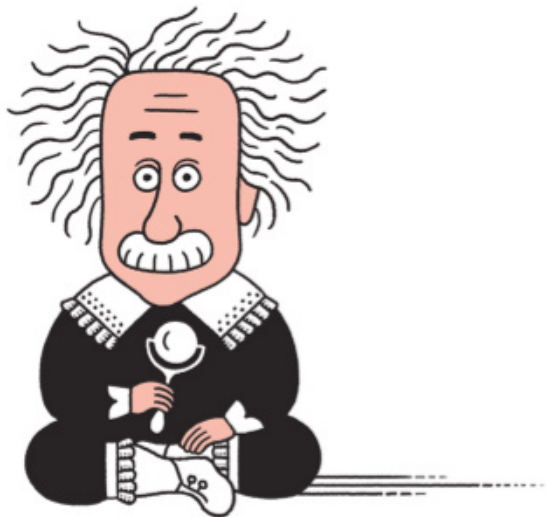
He offered me his hand and I shook it. It was only later that I thought that good manners had made us both use strange, celebratory language at this bad moment, over the fresh corpse of Augustus.

The woman who worked for me took Augustus off my knees, and wrapped him more securely in his chewed-up towel and some other cloth. She said of the neat bundle she had created, "Like a baby." She meant well, but her words sent one in the opposite direction. Augustus was not at the start of his life; he was one from whom life had been taken away.

Augustus was carried off to the garden. I didn't know what had been prepared there, but I was soon to find out. The vet had given instructions to the man who worked there, and while we were busy with the injections he had dug a hole of certain dimensions for Augustus. The hole was in the grassy knoll near the gate. Augustus had made that knoll his afternoon resting place over the past year, and it had long before been decided that if anything were to happen to Augustus that was where he would be placed.

It was a correct thing to do, and correct, too, to cover his grave with an overturned wheelbarrow, to deter wild animals; but I would have preferred it if he had been cremated, reduced to ashes and vapor, taken beyond decay, rather than placed, however reverentially, however well swaddled, in that damp hole which would eat away his lovely fur and his beautiful eyes. I have often promised myself that I would find out how long it would have taken his body to perish, to cease to be recognizable. But I never have; I would have found it very hard to live with the knowledge.

Nearly sixty years ago my father died. In that dark time my younger sister Sati hit upon a comforting idea. Our father, with all his cantankerousness, was a humorist, and Sati's idea was that during this time our father was considering the family grief and having a good laugh. Something like this occurred to me after the death of Augustus. We saw him everywhere, in the house, the garden, the hedge. My idea was that Augustus was considering everything in the house which no longer held him: he was considering everything and working out in his intelligent way how he should respond. ♦



EINSTEIN: THE UNTOLD STORY

BY HART POMERANTZ

Because of his poor sense of direction and his very large head, Albert Einstein was born in Ulm, Germany, in 1879, at the age of two. As a youngster, he walked to school every morning, but, also owing to his poor sense of direction, he attended eight different schools. He was good at math even as an infant. He looked at his parents from his crib and wondered how one plus one could possibly make three.

As a child, he showed an interest in physics and read many books on the subject. He even called his father's sister Anti-Matter. One of Einstein's heroes was Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered gravity when an apple fell on his head as he lay in his garden. Einstein, attempting to emulate Newton, lay on the grass in his own garden for ten hours, but nothing happened. He thought that he had disproved Newton's theory, until his mother told him there were no apple trees in their garden. Einstein continued to honor his hero by eating his special fig cookies every day, as an after-school snack.

Young Einstein was always experimenting. He once swung his cat by the tail and noticed that the animal became more elongated the faster he swung it. The observation had no scientific significance, but it did cause a deep rift in their previously close relationship.

At university, Einstein took a course in philosophy. He studied one of Zeno's paradoxes, and, being a budding scientist, he went home and experimented with the theory by walking half-

way to the wall over and over. He never reached the wall, as Zeno predicted, but he did break his nose in three places.

Einstein was absent-minded, but he was also practical. He rarely wore socks, except on formal occasions, when he put them on over his shoes, so as not to have to tie the laces, which he found burdensome.

Einstein married Mileva Marić, a brilliant physicist and the only woman in his university class. The couple had two sons, and Einstein wanted to name them Positive and Negative, so they would stick together. The principle of quantum superposition says that a particle can be in two places at the same time. When Einstein started cheating on Mileva, he used that theory as an alibi. When the marriage deteriorated, because of incessant squabbling, Einstein forced his wife into a contract to prevent her from interfering with his work. The Einsteins' cleaning lady found a draft of the document, which stipulated that Mileva would agree

1. To speak only adverbs.
2. Not to iron her husband's pants while he was wearing them.
3. Never to bring him a bowl of soup with a fork.
4. That sexual intimacy would be withheld except on days beginning with "Z."

Einstein told Mileva that if she granted him a divorce he would give her the money from his Nobel Prize, should he ever win one. He later tried to get out of the deal by telling her that the prize was only a

stick of dynamite signed by Alfred Nobel.

Unable to find a teaching post at any university, Einstein was forced to take a job with the patent office in Bern, Switzerland. While daydreaming about physics one morning, he inadvertently accepted a patent for a new version of the Swiss telephone directory, in which people were listed not alphabetically but according to height. He also granted a patent for a new version of the Bible, with the answers in the back.

The famous photograph of Einstein sticking out his tongue was taken during a brief charitable phase, when he offered to lick stamps for people suffering from dry-mouth disease. This was a common local affliction in those days, traced to a bad run of Swiss cheese. Einstein was lactose intolerant and thus did not succumb to the illness.

When Einstein got remarried, to his cousin Elsa, in 1919, he discovered the true meaning of relativity. Unfortunately, Elsa knew nothing about physics. She thought general relativity was an officer in the German Army. Einstein tried to explain the theory of relativity to Elsa by offering the following example: If Marilyn Monroe sat on your lap for an hour it would seem like a minute, but if you put your hand on a stove for a minute it would feel like an hour. He took her into the kitchen to demonstrate, and she wisely said, "You first."

After Einstein's death, his brain was removed by a doctor named Thomas Harvey, who kept it in a jar. He took the brain everywhere he went and gave slices of it to other scientists to study. When Harvey travelled with Einstein's brain, he booked separate rooms, out of respect. He resented that he had to pay full price for Einstein's room. Once, haggling, he told a clerk, "It's only a brain, for God's sake. You don't have to change the sheets." When he checked out, he learned that Einstein had run up a huge room-service bill.

Einstein's executors went through his desk and found a note, written on a napkin, which said, "Edvard will be the master of ceremonies when I win my second Nobel Prize." In brackets, he wrote, " $E=mc^2$." They also found an early draft of Einstein's most famous saying. "God does not play dice with the universe," it read. "But he does seem to enjoy Monopoly." ♦

LANGUAGE BARRIER

For indigenous people who cross the border, a translation crisis follows.

BY RACHEL NOLAN



Oswaldo Vidal Martín always wears the same thing to court: a striped overshirt, its wide collar and cuffs woven with geometric patterns and flowers. His pants are cherry red, with white stripes. Martín is Guatemalan and works as a court interpreter, so clerks generally assume that he is there to translate for Spanish speakers. But any Guatemalan who sees his clothing, which is called *traje típico*, knows that Martín is indigenous. “My Spanish is more conversational,” Martín told me. “I still have some difficulties with it.” He interprets English for migrants who speak his mother tongue, a Mayan language called Mam.

Martín, who came to the United States with his parents in 1999, when he was four, was studying to be an engineer when the trickle of Mam speakers migrating to the Oakland area, where he lives, turned into a flood. In 2014, some sixty thousand unaccompanied minors crossed into the United States, in what President Barack Obama called “an actual humanitarian crisis on the border.” A local immigration lawyer told me that at least forty per cent of the children and teen-agers arriving in the Bay Area were Mam. Martín trained with a nonprofit in San Francisco called Asociación Mayab—which offers workshops in translation for indigenous-lan-

guage speakers—and then began interpreting. There is bottomless demand. “I could do it three, four, five days a week,” Martín, who also works for his father’s construction company, told me. “Every day.”

One morning in early December, Martín was interpreting for a criminal case in Dublin, east of Oakland. A clerk signed him in—“*Buenos días*,” she greeted him—and then he met the people he’d be translating for, a Mam husband and wife who had been the victims of an attempted home burglary. Through Martín, the couple sought reassurance from the judge that their immigration status wouldn’t be questioned.

Martín accompanied the husband to the witness box, while the wife waited in a nearby room. Watching a skilled simultaneous interpreter is a bit like watching someone speaking in tongues. As soon as the judge starts talking, the interpreter mutters along, not waiting for the sentence to be over before beginning to translate. Martín relayed the witness’s answers in a low, steady voice, in American-accented English.

The testimony turned on the layout of the kitchen. There are twenty-two officially recognized Mayan languages in Guatemala; all of them use relational nouns instead of prepositions—Mam uses “head” to say “on top of”—and they have complex grammatical rules to describe bodies in space. The witness pinched his fingers and dropped them down to imitate his wife putting cash in her purse. He worked his eyebrows. He didn’t look up when the prosecutor asked a question. He was telling his story to Martín, the only person in the room who understood.

When his wife emerged and was asked to spell her name, she looked at the ground and whispered in Mam, “I will not be able to spell my name. I did not go to school to learn how.” But she warmed to Martín, glancing over at him as she became more comfortable.

The prosecutor asked, “What is your primary language?”

“The same language I’m using now,” she said. “I only know a little bit of Spanish.” She does not speak English at all.

During the lunch break, Martín and I went out for burritos. In line, a man in a baseball cap approached. “You are

Oswaldo Martín interprets for migrants who speak the Mayan language Mam.

doing a great job in there,” he said. Martín looked at him, confused. The man lifted his cap. “I’m the judge!”

Guatemala has a population of fifteen million people, forty per cent of them indigenous, according to the most recent census. In the past year, two hundred and fifty thousand Guatemalan migrants have been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border. At least half of them are Mayans, and many speak little or no Spanish. According to the Department of Justice, Mam was the ninth most common language used in immigration courts last year, more common than French. Three Guatemalan Mayan languages made the top twenty-five: Mam, K’iche’, and Q’anjob’al.

The Bay Area is unusual in that Mam-speaking asylum seekers may be able to access in-person court interpretation. The vast majority of indigenous-language interpretation in the U.S. is done over the phone, by for-profit companies such as Lionbridge and S.O.S. International. Credibility is an official factor in a judge’s assessment of an asylum claim, and much can be lost on the phone. The quality of telephone interpretation also varies wildly. Martín says that he took the exam to become a Lionbridge translator, and, to test the company, invented extra material, a cardinal sin for translators. He passed anyway. (Lionbridge declined to comment.)

The U.S. government claims to provide proper translation at all points in the immigration process, but, in practice, it rarely offers Mayan-language translation at the border or in holding cells. (A spokesperson from Customs and Border Protection said, “We use a third-party translation service via telephone when we are unable to communicate due to language barriers. We do our best to make sure we can communicate accurately, with everyone, throughout their time in our custody.”) Until just a few years ago, there was a tendency to treat Mayan languages as “dialects.” A former immigration judge told me that all her Mayan-language cases, when they came from Customs and Border Protection, were “listed on the court docket as Spanish.” When Mayan-language asylum seekers can manage some Spanish, it is often not enough to navigate credible-fear interviews—in which migrants must explain why they are afraid of returning to their home countries.

Between April and June, 2018, the Trump Administration adopted a “zero-tolerance” policy, intended to deter migration at the southern border. As part of the policy, parents were forcibly separated from their children. That July, Martín got a call from Asociación Mayab. Lawyers at the border were looking for Mam speakers to translate for detained migrant families. Martín travelled to the U.S. Border Patrol Central Processing Center, in McAllen, Texas, which became notorious for holding children in cages made of chain-link fencing. He ended up translating for a migrant named Mario Perez Domingo, who spoke “barely any Spanish,” according to his lawyer, Efrén Olivares, of the Texas Civil Rights Project.

Domingo and his two-year-old daughter had been picked up by a Border Patrol agent who asked for their papers and then accused Domingo of forging his daughter’s birth certificate. The agent asked in Spanish if he had “paid for the certificate,” and Domingo said yes, because Guatemalans pay a small fee to the civil registry for birth certificates. The Border Patrol argued that Domingo had bought it on the black market and that the child was not his daughter, and took her away. (BuzzFeed reported on this separation.)

Domingo didn’t have the language skills to explain. Not even Olivares, his lawyer, could fully understand what had happened. During Domingo’s criminal hearing, he was given only a Spanish-language translator. On the stand, he kept talking about a son who had been taken away. “But he didn’t have a son, he had a daughter,” Olivares said.

By the time Martín got involved, Domingo had been transferred from McAllen, so they talked on the phone. In fewer than five minutes, Martín had the facts of the case. I asked if Domingo spoke Spanish. “Not to the point where he could really explain himself or be able to understand what was going on,” Martín said.

I asked if language was a factor in the separation, and Martín said, “Definitely.” Martín is generally unflappable, but an edge of anger came through. “They know that they can get away with it.” The father was reunited with his daughter only after taking a DNA test, a month later, and then both were released.

Extended detentions or deportations caused by mistranslation or lack of trans-

lation are not rare. A former volunteer at the South Texas Family Residential Center, in Dilley, Texas, the nation’s largest immigrant-detention center, told me that cases can turn on the difference between competent and incompetent translation. A mother held there told non-Guatemalan interpreters that she had had “trouble” in Guatemala because of her “blouses,” which sounds innocuous in English. She meant her *huipil*, a hand-woven blouse worn by Mayans. She was saying that she was persecuted for being indigenous, but the interpreter didn’t understand or explain. The woman’s claim was rejected, and she was deported.

According to a filing by the A.C.L.U. last August, a father accused of a crime was separated from his son without a Q’eqchi’ translator present. During the six-month separation, the child “began to forget his family’s native language, and he suffered extreme isolation because of his inability to speak Spanish, English, or any language common in the shelter,” according to the filing. Another boy was separated “due to father’s alleged mental health problems; child advocates later determined father’s indigenous language may led [sic] to wrong mental health concern.” By the time U.S. authorities acknowledged that there was no mental-health problem, they had deported the father.

Lee Gelernt, a lawyer for the A.C.L.U., which brought a lawsuit to stop the child separations, told me that, of more than five thousand parents separated from their children, at least eight hundred were deported without them. “A significant number of those were indigenous,” Gelernt said. His team found that half were Guatemalan, and that “ten to twenty per cent” were from indigenous-majority departments, such as San Marcos, Huehuetenango, and Quiché. (Children were taken from their parents before the zero-tolerance policy took effect, and about eleven hundred have been taken since it was ruled unlawful.) “The indigenous population was likely the least able to understand their rights, and may therefore have been more susceptible to losing their children and waiving away their own asylum rights,” Gelernt said.

Both Olivares and Gelernt believe that the system denies basic rights to Spanish-speaking asylum seekers as well, but that difficulties are exacerbated for

Mayan-language speakers. “The language barrier contributed, at least in part, to a lot of those separations,” Olivares said.

Then there are the deaths. “Kids dying on the border are Mayan,” Naomi Adelson, the interpreter who trained Martín at Asociación Mayab, told me. Six children have died in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security since Donald Trump took office. Five were indigenous. Jakelin Caal Maquín, a seven-year-old Q’eqchi’ girl, had a fever that spiked on a long bus ride from the New Mexico desert, where she was picked up with her father, to a Border Patrol detention center. She died from a bacterial infection that led to multiple-organ failure after she received no medical care for ninety minutes. Felipe Gómez Alonzo, an eight-year-old Chuj boy, died of the flu as he and his father were shuttled between holding centers. President Trump placed blame for the deaths on the children’s fathers, who had signed intake waivers stating that their children did not need medical care. The waivers were in English, and officials provided a verbal Spanish translation—two languages that the fathers did not speak fluently or at all.

Mayan Guatemalans have a persistent problem: explaining to people that they still exist. The ancient Mayan cities collapsed in the eighth or ninth century, but the Mayan people remained, farming corn in small towns. One archaeologist compared it to the fall of the So-

viet Union: the structure of life has changed, but the people are still there. All the Mayan languages share a common root, but most of them are mutually unintelligible. Yucatec Mayan is tonal, like Cantonese. K’iche’, the language of the “Popol Vuh,” has six or ten vowels, depending on the dialect. Mam is produced far back in the mouth and comes out softly raspy. The variations are not a mark of being cut off from external influences, the linguist William Hanks told me, but, rather, a sign of development. Mayan languages have had four thousand years to ramify. “Mayans have never been isolated,” Hanks said. In 1990, the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala was formed, and a branching linguistics tree, showing the common origin of all Mayan languages, became a symbol of the Pan-Mayan movement. (Mam emerged from the trunk about two thousand years ago.) There is still debate about which subdivisions should be counted as dialects. (A chestnut in the field of linguistics: “A language is a dialect with an army.”) The introduction to the Academy’s official Mam-Spanish dictionary reads, “Language is the backbone of the culture and cosmovision of a people.”

Last summer, I visited Martín’s hometown, Todos Santos Cuchumatán, in the lofty pine mountains near the border with Mexico, one of the coldest parts of the highlands. To get there, I drove through seven distinct language groups in two days. On the mountaintop just

before the descent into the valley of Todos Santos, there is no running water—women fetch it from wells with plastic jugs. Suddenly, you start seeing men in cherry-red striped pants watering their vegetable patches.

Nearly everyone in Guatemala has some Mayan heritage, but the indigenous are considered a separate group, identified by language, place of origin, and, for women, colorful clothing woven on backstrap looms. (In Todos Santos, the men, too, wear *traje*.) Mayan people tend to be much poorer than non-indigenous Guatemalans, the result of a long history of oppression and land theft.

Some Central American migrants to the U.S. have adopted the slogan of the post-colonial immigrants’-rights campaigns in Europe, from the nineteen-eighties: “We are here because you were there.” In 1954, the C.I.A. backed a coup that overthrew a President who was overseeing land-reform measures that included expropriating United Fruit’s holdings. The coup led to a civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996, during which Marxist-Leninist guerrilla groups tried to topple a series of U.S.-backed governments and dictatorships. In the early eighties, the Guatemalan Army believed—often wrongly—that Mayans were susceptible to guerrilla ideology. Soldiers pillaged indigenous communities, raped women and girls, and stole children who survived massacres, putting hundreds up for adoption. (Guerrilla fighters also attacked Mayans whom they believed were informing for the Army.) The Army burned houses and churches as well as cornfields—sacred sources of sustenance for Mayans. Two hundred thousand people died during the war, the Western Hemisphere’s bloodiest conflict of the twentieth century; eighty-three per cent of them were indigenous.

In Todos Santos, which was then a small cluster of adobe houses, the Army openly massacred Mam families, intending to terrorize the population. American Green Berets helped train a special-forces unit called the *kaibiles*, named for a Mam leader who had evaded capture by Spanish conquistadors. This unit committed the worst atrocities of the war. A Mam man told an anthropologist that, in 1982, soldiers captured an accused guerrilla fighter and summoned the people of Todos Santos to the town square. A



“This is just in case I need to find my way out of this relationship.”

soldier cut the man open from his neck to his belly. “Then he took out the liver of the poor man,” the witness said. “He grabbed the liver out, and he ate it just like that, in front of the soldiers, in front of the people. We did not understand.” After the war, a U.N.-backed truth commission found that the Guatemalan government had committed “genocidal acts” against Mayan communities.

Interpreters a generation older than Martín told me that, when they work on asylum cases, they must confront their own traumatic memories. One man translated for a woman who had been separated from her son at the border. He said that it was “living my experience all over again.” The woman described how her son had been pulled from her arms. At first, he was screaming. Then he began hyperventilating, and couldn’t get a sound out. Then the guards took him away.

When the interpreter was ten years old, his mother was kidnapped by the Army. “It was Sunday. I had climbed up into a tree to play with kites. My aunt came out. She’s one of those people with a strong personality, who doesn’t tell you things calmly,” he recalled. “And she said, ‘Come down out of there. They have taken your mom.’”

Despite the genocide, asylum status was hard to come by in the U.S., because Guatemalans were fleeing a regime that was supported by millions of dollars of U.S. military aid each year. In 1982, during the height of state terror, President Ronald Reagan met with the Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, who was later convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. (The sentence was overturned shortly afterward, under political pressure.) Reagan praised Ríos Montt’s “progressive efforts” and said that he was “getting a bum rap on human rights.”

Indigenous people fared little better after the signing of peace agreements, in 1996. The country was opened to international mining and to palm-oil corporations, which have steadily encroached on indigenous land, forcing families to move to Guatemala City. Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, a K’iche’ anthropologist and a public intellectual, wrote in the Guatemalan newspaper *El Periódico*, “The urban children, cornered into selling on street corners, were left choosing between an education for the poor that could only provide them with

a survival-level job, or joining the gangs.” Interpreters told me that racism and even violent discrimination are such ingrained features of Guatemalan life that some Mayan asylum seekers don’t think to mention them in credible-fear interviews. They have plenty of other reasons to flee: gangs, death squads, domestic violence and femicide, disillusionment with a series of corrupt Presidents, and climate change, which is drying out



cornfields—a spiritual as well as an environmental crisis. Guatemalans confound the distinction between “economic migrants” and the types of persecution that the U.S. requires to grant asylum.

Today, Todos Santos is a tangle of “remittance houses,” several stories tall, built of concrete block, with columns and fanciful towers, blue reflective windows, American and Guatemalan flags painted along the trim, and ears of corn strung out to dry on balconies. Most of the houses remain unfinished, with fingers of rebar reaching up from the top floor. Migrants send back money in installments and build floor by floor, until they decide to come home or are deported. The town runs on remittances: a store selling pens and paper is called Librería California, and coyote services are available for Spanish and Mam speakers. In the cemetery just outside town, on the day I was there, a large family was visiting. The son—the only family member who spoke Spanish—pointed to the raised graves, which are painted red, white, and blue, and told me, “Those are the ones who died up there.” The graves were decorated with plastic flowers and offerings of bottles of water with the caps unscrewed.

María Martín (no relation to Oswaldo) is the single staff member in Todos Santos of CONAMIGUA, a Guatemalan government agency that works with migrants and *retornados*, a local euphemism for the deported. Her office is in the town hall, where posters warning against migration are captioned “This

message was sponsored by the U.S. Embassy.” Martín told me that CONAMIGUA’s recent efforts to dissuade migrants included a radio spot in Mam with marimba music. She translated the ad: “Here in Todos Santos Cuchumatán you can excel if you stay and start studying. The trip to the North is very risky and you could encounter death, and then your family would have to suffer and cry.”

Martín admitted that her job is nearly impossible. In her spare time, she volunteers with a group that provides free translation via phone for Mam-speaking migrants in the U.S.

Other people in town work for the for-profit phone-translation services. The wife of a pharmacist who moonlights as an interpreter says that her husband is constantly getting calls from the border in the middle of the night. Oswaldo Martín said that the services “low-ball” translators—they offered him forty-five cents a minute for highly skilled work—but pay that is low in Oakland is high in Todos Santos.

Most people from town who leave for the U.S. try to make it to Fruitvale, the part of Oakland where Martín lives. Pedro Pablo Solares, a specialist in migration and a columnist for the Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre*, travelled throughout the U.S. between 2010 and 2014, providing legal services to migrants. He found that the “immense majority” of Mayans were living in what he called *ciudades espejo*—mirror cities—where migrants from the same small towns in Guatemala have reconstituted communities in the U.S. “If you are a member of the Chuj community and that is your language, there are only fifty thousand people who speak that in the world. There’s only so many places you can go to find people who speak your language,” Solares told me. He described the migration patterns like flight routes: Q’anjob’al speakers from San Pedro Solomá go to Indiantown, Florida; Mam speakers from Tacaná go to Lynn, Massachusetts; Jakalteco speakers from Jacaltenango go to Jupiter, Florida.

“I grew up my entire life speaking Mam, and there is no word for asylum,” Henry Sales, a twenty-seven-year-old immigrant from San Juan Atitán, told me. Sales and Oswaldo Martín were at the César E. Chávez branch of the

public library, in downtown Fruitvale, where they met with other Mam speakers to work on a Mam-English legal dictionary. Sales, who came to the U.S. a decade ago, has jobs at several libraries, translates in immigration court, assists a linguistics Ph.D. student at the University of California, Berkeley, and gives Mam classes. He has a radiant smile and tends to dress formally, down to his shined shoes.

Martín had the idea for the legal dictionary when he came across a Mayan health handbook, which listed ailments in English, Spanish, K'iche', and Mam. Translation isn't just words to words; it's about expressing whole ways of experiencing the world. There has been a long-running debate in Guatemala about whether non-indigenous doctors should be trained to diagnose and treat "*xib'rik-il*"—"el susto," in Spanish—"fright" or "spirit attack," a common illness among Mayans that can involve symptoms ranging from depression to diarrhea and anemia. According to Mayan cosmology, the malady can be caused by violent events, or by the appearance of a "restless soul" who has died in a traumatic way and is unable to find peace.

Sales and Martín speak different dialects of Mam. Though they understand each other, Martín said that Sales's Mam sounds more like French—airy, with swallowed consonants—while his is more like Portuguese—choppy and guttural. Even I can hear the difference. In addition to the legal dictionary, Sales and Martín want to provide workshops in various dialects for Mam translators. The U.S. government does not offer certification tests for Mam interpreters—Martín said that he had once been challenged by an opposing lawyer for not being certified—and Sales and Martín believe that learning more dialects could further "professionalize" Mam interpreters.

They take notes during asylum interviews and court cases, in order to include important terms in the dictionary: "credible fear," "release," "gangs," "stipulate," "persecution." "What we've been doing is try to come up with a definition of 'asylum' and translate that to Mam," Sales said.

Their shorthand translation is "To be held and looked after by the law." "*Qlet tun ley.*"

A longer, more complete definition

that Sales teaches in Mam class is "*Jun u'j tun tkleti tij qa xjal aj kyaj tun tkub' tb'yon ay bix qa tk'awali tu'x txuli/ tchmili.*"

"A paper that saves / protects you from people who are harming / attempting to kill you and your children, your wife / husband."

I asked Sales and Martín if Mam speakers generally understood their explanation of asylum, and Martín said yes, but he mentioned another problem cited by nearly everyone I interviewed. "A tendency for a lot of indigenous people is to agree to everything being asked of them in Spanish," he said, even if it's incorrect and self-incriminating. "A lot of times they get deported," Sales said. Marianne Richardson, a graduate student at the University of Texas, studies access to indigenous languages at the border in Arizona, where many Mayan migrants cross. She told me that, often, when the Border Patrol asks a migrant if he or she speaks Spanish, "the person will just say '*Sí.*' And they'll be, like, 'O.K., can I continue in Spanish?' And the person says, '*Sí.*' But there's not really a comprehension check." She added, "Some of them are really intimidated by an authority figure with a gun and just want to do what they're told."

Sales said, "We have been taught that, if we don't speak Spanish, we are stupid." He said that, when he first went to school in Guatemala and didn't speak any Spanish, "I couldn't defend myself." The other kids would say he was dumb, and he just answered, "Yes, yes," without understanding. "It happened five hundred years ago," he said. "They came and told us, 'You are savages.'"

San Francisco's immigration court convenes in an unmarked skyscraper in the financial district. On an August morning, a list of the names for the day's cases was tacked onto the wall of a waiting room: Manzares, Martínez, Mendoza, Misa. Eleni Wolfe-Roubatis, the director of Immigrant Legal Defense, a nonprofit, told me that about thirty per cent of the court's cases involve Mam speakers, but they are hard to pick out. Unlike other Mayan groups, which have distinctive last names, Mam speakers were named after Spanish people whom they worked for as semi-enslaved peons. A common last name among Mam people is Pablo, for former peons of a certain Don Pablo.

In a courtroom handling family cases, children were scrambling over the furniture and crying. Some migrants didn't have a lawyer, but every case involved an interpreter. The judge, Scott Gambill, told the room, "All these family units have to be heard in a given time. This is a high priority for the Attorney General." In 2018, then Attorney General Jeff Sessions imposed strict quotas and performance metrics to speed up immigration reviews. Sessions announced that family-unit cases were to be heard within a year. Critics saw the move as a way of deporting more people, faster. The change meant that judges were required to rule on at least seven hundred cases per year, which the National Association of Immigration Judges has said impinges on due process.

Judge Gambill repeatedly told asylum seekers and lawyers that he was sorry their court dates were so soon. The speed gave the proceedings a feeling of hitting a language barrier even when there wasn't one. The judge mentioned "riders" several times before I understood that he meant children.

The day's session was intended to set future court dates and check if asylum seekers had changed their address. Migrants tend to move frequently, and if they miss a notice to appear they are ordered deported. One of the asylum seekers was a woman in an elaborately flowered *traje*, with a hot-pink smartphone tucked into the sash. Did she speak Spanish? the judge asked. Her lawyer, Alexandra Bachan, said, "She's going to identify herself, but beyond that . . ." She made the gesture for "so-so."

Leonel Pablo, a young man with gelled hair, ripped jeans, and spotless white sneakers, was in court without a lawyer. The judge asked, through a Spanish-language interpreter, "Do you want a Mam translator?" Pablo looked confused. Then he said, "*Sí,*" and was quiet.

During a break, Bachan stepped outside with Pablo. When they returned, Bachan told Gambill, "I'm probably crazy, but I'm taking the case."

"Delightfully crazy," the judge answered. "You are stepping into the gap." The whole asylum request would have to be assembled and argued in three months. Pablo was alone in court that day, but his "rider"—his eight-year-old son, Hugo—was part of his family unit.

Pablo told me in broken Spanish that he had tried to secure a lawyer: “I call, but they are all busy.” On finding Bachan, he said, “*Estoy muy agradecido con mi Diosito lindo*,” a very Guatemalan way of saying that he was thankful to his sweet God. He had come to court that day planning to represent himself in a language he could barely speak.

From court, I walked to the office of Ilyce Shugall, at the Bar Association of San Francisco, where she runs the Immigrant Legal Defense Program. Shugall was sworn in as an immigration judge in 2017 but stepped down last March. She wrote an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* explaining that, under Sessions’s immigration rules, she could no longer guarantee that asylum seekers had the opportunity to fully present their cases. (In January, 2019, access to asylum was further restricted, when the Trump Administration began to require that many asylum seekers remain in Mexico while waiting for the disposition of their cases.)

I asked Shugall whether indigenous asylum seekers got due process. She let out a big sigh. “Sometimes,” she said, and paused. “They were definitely the most challenging for me as an immigration judge.” She explained that the accelerated schedule has disproportionately affected “rare-language speakers.”

“I wasn’t going to give short shrift to people who clearly weren’t understanding things,” Shugall said. “It was just really time-consuming, and I know not all judges do that.”

Shugall worried less about Mam speakers—since groups such as Asociación Mayab can sometimes provide interpreters—than about the K’iche’ and Q’anjob’al speakers who work as day laborers in the Central Valley. “If you speed up their case, it just doesn’t give them as much time to find various resources, like people who can help them with language, and then find counsel, and get the documentation they need from their village,” she said.

“I found it *incredible* that people who come from remote villages in Guatemala, do not read or write Spanish or English, do not speak Spanish, and are living in rural Central Valley, California, with no transportation, make it to San Francisco for their hearings,” Shugall said. “As long as you have the proper language interpreter at their final hear-



“We could use more grape-jelly packets over here.”

ing, that is the culmination of everything, and they have an opportunity to speak in their language and tell their story, which I’m sure is very gratifying for them in many ways, to finally be able to explain to someone in great detail why they are where they are right now.”

One Saturday, I attended a Mam class that Henry Sales teaches at Laney College, in downtown Oakland. It was Labor Day weekend, but thirty people showed up, a mixture of social workers and public-school teachers. Dave Rose, a teacher at Fremont High School, said that he has a total of a hundred and forty students. “Sixty of them speak Mam,” he said. The other teachers gasped.

Soon Sales was running us through the alphabet. The letters were familiar but the sounds were not. There were glottal stops (as in “uh-oh”), and apostrophes that made a little popping noise out of the preceding consonant. We could barely get out *chjonte*, “thank you.”

Sales showed us how to pronounce “tz,” a hard buzz. “It’s not in the books, but our elders say the sounds are from the sounds of forests and animals,” he said.

Rose wanted to know how to say “You’re late.” *Yaj matzuli*. “I’m going to use that a lot,” he said.

During a break from pronunciation

drills, Sales gave some background on Mayan culture. “I don’t call myself Latino or Hispanic,” he said. “No offense to them. But the Spanish have been the enemy.” Sales told us about the biggest event of the year in Todos Santos Cuchumatán, a horse-riding festival that commemorates an anti-colonial rebellion. “The ancestors saw horses for the first time when they were enslaved by the Spanish,” Sales said. They danced, as an offering, before stealing the horses and escaping into the Cuchumatán Mountains.

The festival is a major holiday for the Mam. Men wear hats with feathers, to represent roosters and a masculine spirit, and gallop through town, past onlookers and marimba bands. Martín told me that he rode in it for the first time in November. It was his first trip to Guatemala in twelve years. He visited family in Todos Santos, and began to set up partnerships to teach Bay Area interpreters various Mam dialects via Skype.

The trip turned out to be an education in what Martín called “Mam modalities and etiquette,” a way of being that is subtly different from that of Californians. “I would describe Mam etiquette as addressing everyone in the room and not taking up space,” he said. “I’m here, but I’m not here for me—it’s for you.” ♦

EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

The ultra-wealthy who argue that they should be paying higher taxes.

BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR

Abigail Disney remembers the moment, two decades ago, when she no longer wanted to fly on her family's private plane. Disney is the granddaughter of Roy O. Disney, who founded the Disney company with his younger brother, Walt, in 1923, and her father was a longtime senior executive there. Abigail's parents owned a Boeing 737, one of the largest private-aircraft models on the market, and they let her use it for family trips. For many years, when Abigail was raising her four children, she would take the plane to Ireland, to visit her mother's castle. The plane "was like a flying playpen," Abigail told me recently. "I've known the pilot since I was a teen-ager." One day, when her children were older, she took an overnight flight from California to New York, where she lives. She was travelling alone, but there was a full staff on duty to cater to her needs. As she got into the queen-size bed and secured the safety belt that stretched across the mattress, preparing to sleep for the next few hours, an unpleasant feeling came over her. "I couldn't help thinking about the carbon footprint of it, and all the fuel," she said. "It just felt so wrong."

It wasn't the first time that Abigail, who inherited part of her grandfather's fortune, had experienced discomfort about her wealth and how little she had done to deserve it. As a child, she would go with her grandfather to Disneyland, where she was treated as a special guest. "He loved taking us to the front of the line," she said. She would hang her head as they marched past other families who had been waiting for rides in the hot sun. "I'd say, 'Grandpa, they hate us,'" she recalled. "And he'd say, 'I worked so hard all those years so you could go to the front of the line.'" As a young adult, Disney forged her own life in New York City, first as a mother and later as a documentary-film producer. She eventually stopped flying on the private plane,

although it took a year or two. ("These things are hard to give up," she told me.) And she started advocating for peace and women's equality.

In 2011, she joined an organization called the Patriotic Millionaires, a group of wealthy Americans who are concerned about rising income inequality and who speak out in favor of policies traditionally considered to be antithetical to their economic interests. She began to make public appearances and videos in which she promoted higher taxes on the wealthy. She told me that she realized that the luxuries she and her family enjoyed were really a way of walling themselves off from the world, which made it easier to ignore certain economic realities. "Coming face to face with it feels fucking awful," she said. "That's why the wealthy have the private planes and the bottle service in the back and the limousines with the tinted windows."

In March, 2018, she received a Facebook message from a custodian at Disneyland who was asking for help. He said that many workers there were barely able to survive on what they were paid, and that their union was fighting for a fifteen-dollar-an-hour minimum wage, without success. The local press had recently published several sensational reports about Disneyland, including a story about a sixty-one-year-old night janitor at the Disneyland Resort who had died, alone, in her car, where she had been living. That year, the Walt Disney Company had reported almost thirteen billion dollars in profit; the night janitor was estimated to have been earning thirteen or fourteen dollars an hour.

"I spent almost a month sitting on it, thinking, What can I do?" Abigail told me. She is a shareholder in the company but has never had a formal role there, and was wary of interfering in the family business. "It was hard for me to decide that I could take this on," she said. To learn more about what was hap-

pening, she flew to Los Angeles and met with fifteen or so Disneyland employees at the Anaheim office of Workers United Local 50, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union that represents about seventy-five hundred food-service workers at Disney theme parks. "I have a healthy skepticism about the way that unions characterize things, so I was not inclined to simply accept whatever was told to me," she said.

Abigail had told the union representatives that she didn't want her visit to attract publicity, so some of the workers were summoned to the office without being told whom they were meeting. They sat in a circle and talked about their economic struggles. A full-time hair stylist named Rebekah Pedersen told Abigail that she, too, had often slept in her car. Abigail recalled that a thirty-year veteran of the park said that she had also recently been homeless for a time, and that some of the workers said that they were on food stamps. (A spokesperson for the company issued a statement saying, "We strongly disagree with this characterization of our employees and their experience at Disney." The company also said, "Disney has made significant investments to expand the earning potential and upward mobility of our employees.")

The president of Workers United Local 50, Chris Duarte, who attended the meeting, told me that he could see that Abigail was struggling to process what she was learning. "She didn't want to trash her family name," he said. "The company does a lot of good things. But to have this ugly thing in the closet—I know it bothered her." Abigail spent the next few weeks working on an e-mail to Bob Iger, the company's C.E.O. The Walt Disney Company is one of the largest and most profitable media businesses in the world, and in 2018 Iger, who that year announced a new streaming



Abigail Disney, an heir to the Disney fortune, wants to convince more people that systemic change is needed.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PLATON

THE NEW YORKER, JANUARY 6, 2020

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service and who had directed the company's acquisitions of Marvel, Pixar, Lucasfilm, and 21st Century Fox's film and TV assets, received almost sixty-six million dollars in total compensation. That was more than fourteen hundred times the median pay of a company employee. Although some in the business world say that Iger deserves his staggering salary because of the company's financial success, Abigail found the pay ratio disturbing. "It is something that the whole country is engaged in—shaving every benefit off workers' lives, making sure they are living as close to the bone as is humanly possible," she said. (Iger has pointed out that his salary was unusually high in 2018 because of a one-time stock award that he was granted after the acquisition of 21st Century Fox and as part of an agreement that he would remain at Disney for three years. His annual compensation was \$39.3 million. Disney has defended Iger's compensation package, saying that he has "delivered exceptional value for the company, its shareholders and employees.")

In the U.S., executive compensation

has increased, on average, by nine hundred and forty per cent since 1978, according to one estimate; during the same period, worker pay has risen twelve per cent. Income inequality hasn't been this extreme since the nineteen-twenties. A recent study by the economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman found that, as a result of cuts to estate and corporate taxes, as well as the 2017 G.O.P. tax bill, the four hundred richest Americans pay a lower over-all tax rate than any other group in the country. In a *Times* Op-Ed, Saez and Zucman wrote, "This is the tax system of a plutocracy."

In Abigail's message to Iger, she argued that the company would be damaged by reports that some employees were being paid so little. The press had been reporting rumors that Iger was thinking about running for President, and he had said in an interview that America was "gravely in need of optimism." (Oprah Winfrey publicly told Iger that she would canvass for him in Iowa.) This was an opportunity, Abigail said, for him to set an example by offer-

ing more generous wages. She wrote, "You could become the leader of the most ethical multi-billion-dollar multinational business the world has ever known." Iger responded a few days later, thanking her for her e-mail. He said that he was proud that there hadn't been any work stoppages during his tenure, and he suggested that she follow up with the human-resources department.

In June, 2018, a ballot initiative that proposed raising the minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour was introduced in the city of Anaheim. It would apply to all employers in the city, the largest of which, by far, was Disneyland. In July, four months before the midterm elections, when the ballot measure was up for a vote, the company agreed to increase hourly wages to fifteen dollars for about ten thousand of Disneyland's thirty thousand unionized workers, and to raise the wages of its non-union workers as well. (The measure passed.) Still, Abigail felt dissatisfied. Earlier this year, after some public comments that she had made about Iger's salary—she called it "insane"—were widely circulated, she decided to go further. On Easter, while taking a train to visit her college-age son, she posted twenty-two messages on Twitter criticizing the disparities at the company. "Let me [be] very clear," the first one read. "I like Bob Iger. I do NOT speak for my family but only for myself. . . . But by any objective measure a pay ratio over a thousand is insane." She went on, "What on earth would be wrong with shifting some of the profits—the fruits of these employees' labor—to some folks other than those at the top?" Within two hours, she saw that her tweets had been viewed half a million times. "By that night, it was at three million," she said. "And I thought, O.K., something's happening."

She began thinking about how to translate the viral moment into something more lasting. "It's really easy to reduce someone like me to a crazy rich girl," she said. "I needed to find a way to maintain my credibility and not seem like I had an axe to grind about Disney." Since then, she has testified before Congress about worker pay, worked with activist groups fighting for more progressive economic policies, and given dozens of speeches and interviews. Ab-



"Thank you for your e-mail. I will be out on a walk for the next twenty minutes and plan on barking remotely until my return."

igail told me that she hopes that the C.E.O.s of other companies are paying attention. “Have you seen the movie ‘Caddyshack?’” she asked. “There’s a gopher, and he pops up every so often.” She added, “I’m the gopher. So I’ll continue to pop up periodically and be the bane of their existence, because I don’t want them to feel comfortable. They are participating in a social and economic process that is destroying actual human lives. And I’m just not going to go along with it. Especially not with my name attached.”

Disney is one of the highest-profile figures in the Patriotic Millionaires, which now has more than two hundred members in thirty-four states: technology entrepreneurs, software engineers, Wall Street investors, industrialists, and inheritors of family fortunes. Although Abigail is best known for her criticisms of the Disney company, the group’s mission was initially a simple idea endorsed by a half-dozen rich people: “Please raise our taxes.” The members now have the broader goal of pressuring their wealthy peers to confront what they believe are the destructive effects of trickle-down economics—the idea, which has driven U.S. policy decisions for several decades and has largely been debunked, that reducing taxes on businesses and the wealthy will benefit low- and middle-income workers. Members of the Patriotic Millionaires lobby lawmakers and affluent individuals to instead support policies that would, for instance, increase the minimum wage and raise taxes on corporations and the rich. “If you want to change social norms, you’ve got to be out there going public about your beliefs,” Eric Schoenberg, a former investment banker, said, during a breakfast that the group held in New York, in October.

Patriotic Millionaires was founded by Erica Payne, a political strategist who had worked on Bill Clinton’s inaugural committee and had served as the deputy national finance director for the Democratic National Committee before getting an M.B.A. from Wharton. She has long, dark hair and a gleaming smile, and she speaks at a high velocity. She was a cheerleading champion in high school, in North Carolina, and proudly displays a trophy from that era

in the Patriotic Millionaires’ main office, in downtown Washington, D.C., just a few blocks from the White House. In 2010, Republican tax cuts were about to expire, and it had become clear that President Barack Obama was going to give in to lobbying pressure and extend the cuts, even for wealthy people. “I thought that was horrifying,” Payne told me. “As did two millionaires I was talking to.” Those millionaires were Guy Saperstein, a civil-rights lawyer, and David desJardins, an early employee at Google.

Payne wrote a short open letter, urging Obama to let the tax cuts expire, and Saperstein and desJardins signed it, as did forty-five other people who qualified for the tax cut, including the musician Moby and Ben Cohen, the co-founder of Ben & Jerry’s. Payne called the group the Patriotic Millionaires for Fiscal Strength, posted the letter online, and sent it out as a press release. It was immediately picked up by the media, Payne said, probably because “lots of wealthy people say they want to do good in the world but fewer of them want to specifically advance the things that would actually bring good in the world but that may cost them.” The letter got the attention of the White House, and Payne was invited to attend Obama’s 2012 Tax Day address.

She began approaching Democratic donors and businesspeople to pitch the idea of an organization focussed on three core beliefs: that if people work full time they should be paid enough to meet their basic needs; that regular people deserve as much political power as the wealthy; and that rich people and corporations should pay higher taxes. Payne speaks bluntly about these goals. People who support tax cuts for high earners and reductions to social programs are “very deliberately attempting to create a permanent underclass,” she said. “You want people to suffer and die earlier, because your greed is more important to you than another human being.”

Payne also runs the Agenda Project, a progressive political-advocacy organization that she founded in 2009 and which she describes as aiming to “dis-

mantle the conservative premise and shove it into the dark recesses of the human psyche, where it belongs.” She has a knack for illustrating policy battles in ways that are both bizarre and memorable. In one of the Agenda Project’s ads, which she made during a Republican push to drastically cut Medicare, an actor who resembles Paul Ryan, the former House Speaker, wheels

an elderly woman through an idyllic wooded park before steering the wheelchair to the edge of a cliff and pushing her off; other ads of Payne’s have targeted the Tea Party, Mitt Romney, and antiabortion activists. The videos are cheaply made, and a little crude, but they generate attention.

Payne manages the Patriotic Millionaires with a similar savvy. Many members are embarrassed by the group’s name, for instance—preferring not to identify themselves as millionaires, because it seems tacky, or objecting to the implication that non-members might not be patriotic—but Payne is adamant that it must be kept. “A hundred per cent of our members hate the name, and every time we have a gathering we have thirty minutes set aside so they can bitch about it,” she said. “And then, at the conclusion of the thirty minutes, I tell them we’re not going to change the name.” She added, “The brand was very intentional. I think the lack of subtlety in the name is part of the way that we actually achieve our end goal.” One of the group’s members, Jacqueline Boberg, a former technology salesperson, agreed that it had an odd power. “Republicans will open the door, because who wouldn’t?” she said. “You’re patriotic, and you’re a millionaire!” Frank Patitucci, the owner and C.E.O. of Nu-Compass Mobility, an employee-relocation firm, told me that the group had proved a draw with the press. “I joined this organization because it gave me the most leverage,” Patitucci said. “You write a letter to the editor as Joe Blow, it might be ignored. But if you write as a Patriotic Millionaire you have an opportunity to make a bigger impact.”

To qualify for the group, members must have an annual income of at least a million dollars, or assets worth more





"If I had to do it over, I'd mount the python higher on the wall."

than five million dollars. That could include many families who would describe themselves as upper middle class—who, for instance, own homes in cities with hot real-estate markets. When I asked Payne how hard it was to persuade rich people to join, she said, "I think the last time I checked there were about three hundred and seventy-five thousand taxpayers in the country who make a million dollars a year in income"—there are now almost half a million—"and we have a couple hundred members." She laughed. "If you ever needed a back-of-the-envelope calculation of how many of America's elite are concerned about the basic well-being of their fellow-citizens, that should give you a rough estimate." Members include Chuck Collins, the heir to the Oscar Mayer fortune; Roberta Kaplan, the civil-rights lawyer; Jeffrey Gural, the real-estate investor; and George Zimmer, the founder of Men's Wearhouse.

It might seem disingenuous for people to try to change the rules after they have already amassed fortunes via the old, "rigged" system; some might also see their efforts as a way to generate flattering publicity or to alleviate feelings of guilt. But the group's members

say that they are concerned about the future of the nation. Some of them feel that severe inequality fuels corruption and has led to the election of Trump and other right-wing leaders across the world. Many of them believe that inaction on inequality could lead to the kinds of violent street protests recently seen in countries like Chile.

The group has produced TV ads and online videos and has sent members to speak at rallies; before important votes, it often targets members of Congress who are likely to be influenced by rich businesspeople in their districts. In New York State, the group has lobbied to close the carried-interest tax loophole, which shields the income of many hedge-fund and private-equity-fund managers, and it has advocated for a so-called pied-à-terre bracket, which would apply to people with part-time homes. Several members, including Molly Munger, the daughter of Charlie Munger, the longtime vice-chairman of Warren Buffett's firm, Berkshire Hathaway, have spoken in favor of a wealth tax.

In February, Morris Pearl, a former executive at the asset-management firm BlackRock and the chair of the Patriotic Millionaires, wrote an article for

the group's Web site expressing support for Elizabeth Warren's proposed wealth tax, which would impose a tariff of two per cent on fortunes greater than fifty million dollars and three per cent on those above a billion. (Warren recently doubled her proposed billion-plus tax rate, to six per cent.) The group helped develop a bill, introduced in the House of Representatives in November, that would impose a surtax on the country's highest earners, and it is working on other legislation, including a bill that would raise the estate tax.

In July, the House passed another bill supported by the Millionaires, called the Raise the Wage Act, which would increase the federal hourly minimum wage to fifteen dollars by 2025 and would eliminate a law that permits tipped workers to be paid as little as two dollars and thirteen cents an hour. Judy Conti, the government-affairs director of the National Employment Law Project, one of the groups with which the Millionaires pushed for the bill, told me that, before the legislation was introduced, two hundred and three House members had indicated that they would support it—fifteen votes short of the number needed for Democratic leadership to introduce it for a vote.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business groups argued that the bill would kill jobs. Many of the undecided members of Congress were moderate Democrats who supported raising the minimum wage but thought that fifteen dollars might be too high and worried about the consequences for small businesses in their states. The Patriotic Millionaires, working with several other organizations, made a list of around thirty undecided House members and identified those who might be especially receptive to business leaders who supported the bill. The group then contacted those members and their staffs. Conti said, of the Patriotic Millionaires, "They help us make the business case for the minimum wage and give moderate members a measure of the cover they need to vote yes. They will talk to members about how taking the high road is the best business strategy, how this is part of how we invest in our workers, that when we treat them better they work better for us—we have less turnover,

higher productivity—and when workers in our community have more money in their pockets they spend it at our businesses.” The bill passed with thirteen more votes than it needed. When I asked her how impactful the group had been, she said, “When you’re looking for those last votes, it’s micro-targeting. If they can help deliver two members—and they helped deliver at least two members—they’re effective.”

Beginning in the early eighties, the remnants of the post-F.D.R. era of social democracy gave way to the age of Ronald Reagan, which brought deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy, and the promise that free-market capitalism would lead to widespread prosperity. In spite of ample evidence that the new system wasn’t working as anticipated, this ideology has dominated economic policymaking ever since. Sean Wilentz, a historian at Princeton, told me, “We live in a world where supply-side economics, which was always a fraud, became a religion.”

After the recession of 2008-09, the Occupy Wall Street protest movement focussed public attention on the financial industry and its influence on government. The anthropologist David Graeber, one of the movement’s early organizers, helped popularize the term “the ninety-nine per cent” to describe everyone who wasn’t among the wealthiest “one per cent,” a tiny group that controls forty per cent of the nation’s wealth. In 2014, the French economist Thomas Piketty’s book “Capital in the Twenty-first Century,” based on a decade of research into the distribution of wealth, became a surprise best-seller. Piketty argued that, without aggressive taxation, the very wealthy would continue to pull further ahead of everyone else. Abigail Disney told me that, although she didn’t get through all eight hundred and sixteen pages of the book, she “certainly got the gist of it, and the gist of it was really important.”

That year, the entrepreneur Nick Hanauer, one of the first investors in Amazon, gave a TED talk called “Beware, Fellow Plutocrats, the Pitchforks Are Coming.” After describing his multiple homes, his yacht, and his private plane, Hanauer argued that the U.S. was at risk of becoming a neo-feudal-

ist rentier society similar to France before the Revolution. In an essay in *Politico*, he wrote, “Revolutions, like bankruptcies, come gradually, and then suddenly. One day, somebody sets himself on fire, then thousands of people are in the streets, and before you know it, the country is burning. And then there’s no time for us to get to the airport and jump on our Gulfstream Vs and fly to New Zealand.”

In the past few years, many economists, including Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, as well as Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee, of M.I.T., have tried to demonstrate that extreme inequality can be reversed. In the lead-up to the 2020 elections, pundits and politicians on the left and right have been asking how best to fix capitalism. In January, the Fox News host Tucker Carlson spent fifteen minutes criticizing free-market capitalism as a system that exploits average people. Polls indicate that the number of Americans who support some form of socialism has risen dramatically. In March, during an interview on “Morning Joe,” the former Colorado governor John Hickenlooper, who was running for President as a business-friendly Democrat, refused to call himself a capitalist.

More business leaders have begun to say that inequality has reached dangerous levels. In April, Ray Dalio, the founder of the hundred-and-sixty-billion-dollar hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, posted a lengthy essay on LinkedIn in which he wrote that American workers in the bottom sixty per cent of earners have had no income growth, after adjusting for inflation, since 1980, while the incomes of the top ten per cent have doubled and those of the top one per cent have tripled. One graphic ranked wealthy countries in terms of the likelihood that a child born into the lowest economic quartile would move into the top quartile; the U.S. was second to last, ahead of only China. Dalio warned that, if capitalism wasn’t drastically changed, the U.S. would have “great conflict and some form of revolution that will hurt everyone.”

On April 10th, a video of Represen-

tative Katie Porter, of California, questioning Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase, went viral. Dimon had previously spoken about the many Americans “left behind,” noting that forty per cent of people in the U.S. earned less than fifteen dollars an hour, and that the same percentage said that they didn’t have four hundred dollars in savings to deal with an emergency. JPMorgan Chase had just reported \$9.2 billion in profit for the first quarter and almost thirty billion dollars in revenue; Dimon had been paid thirty-one million dollars the year before. Porter described the monthly budget of a hypothetical new employee at a Chase bank in Irvine, California—a single mother who was earning sixteen dollars and fifty cents an hour. After paying the rent for a one-bedroom apartment that she shared with her daughter, plus the costs of utilities, food, child care, and a basic cell phone, the woman, Porter said, had a five-hundred-and-sixty-dollar deficit each month. “My question for you, Mr. Dimon, is: How should she manage this budget shortfall while she’s working full time at your bank?” Porter said. Dimon seemed uncomfortable; he told Porter that he “would have to think about it.”

Dimon chairs the Business Roundtable, which represents the C.E.O.s of America’s largest companies, and, in August, the group issued a statement proposing to redefine “the Purpose of a Corporation.” The group advised companies to take into account the interests of “all stakeholders,” including customers, employees, suppliers, and local communities. Although the statement was signed by dozens of C.E.O.s, it lacked details or

specific commitments, and some critics saw it as an attempt to preempt the most radical proposals from the Democratic Presidential candidates, such as banning stock buybacks and mandating that employees have a voice in selecting a company’s board of directors.

Over lunch at a vegan restaurant in Manhattan, Morris Pearl, a sturdy, unflappable man with a crown of white hair, who was wearing a windbreaker—he likes to travel around Manhattan



by bicycle—told me that he decided to dedicate himself to the Patriotic Millionaires full time soon after making a business trip to Athens in the summer of 2013, during Greece’s economic crisis. He had been a member of the Patriotic Millionaires for some time, and had become so vocal about his view that top earners should be paying higher taxes that his day job, at BlackRock, where he specialized in valuing complex bonds, had become a bit awkward. He had travelled to Athens to meet with a group of international bankers who were trying to assign values to the defaulted loans of a Greek bank that was seeking a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. At a lunch meeting one day with the bankers, he was returning from the dessert table when he noticed a commotion on the street below. “I thought at first it was a parade,” he said. “Then I realized it was a demonstration in front of parliament.” He went on, “I turned around and looked at these twenty bankers, worrying about their capital and liquidity issues. I wondered if I was really doing anything to help people in Greece.”

Pearl also recalled a family vacation on Paradise Island, in the Bahamas, at a resort staffed by low-wage workers. One of his children said that the only people who seemed to enjoy their jobs there were the trainers who worked with the dolphins. “I hadn’t thought about it until my kids brought it up,” Pearl said. “I don’t want our country to end up like South Africa. If you recall, apartheid did not end well for the rich people or the poor people.”

For its first nine years, the Patriotic Millionaires operated out of Washington and New York. This year, the group expanded to the West Coast, in part to attract more members from the technology industry. Kelsea-Marie Pym, the group’s executive director, pointed out that California has been at the forefront of implementing the kinds of economic policies that the group wants to see enacted nationally. “Our goal is to begin to challenge the wealthy to understand that inequality is at such a destabilizing level right now that, by sit-

ting on the sidelines, you’re effectively adding to the problem,” Pym said.

In mid-August, members of the Patriotic Millionaires gathered for one of the first meetings of the organization’s California chapter, at the Fremont Hills Country Club, between San Francisco and San Jose. Charles Simmons, a former executive at Sun Microsystems and NetApp, had arranged for the use of the space. He told me that his recent experience as a math tutor for high-school students in the poor community of East Palo Alto, along with Trump’s election, had spurred him to become more politically active. Simmons and about fifteen other people took seats around a banquet table decorated with white orchids. The first item on the agenda was the multimillionaire-surtax bill, which was expected to be introduced in the House. The tax would include a ten-per-cent surcharge on all income above two million dollars, raising the top tax rate from thirty-seven per cent of income to forty-seven per cent. It would also apply to investment income, including capital gains and dividends, addressing what many tax experts see as a crucial weakness in the current laws. Pym had prepared a fact sheet about the bill, along with a list of talking points that members could use to promote the tax.

“I have a marketing point,” Blaine Garst, an early Apple employee, with a bushy white beard and a long ponytail, said. “Instead of saying ‘multimillionaires,’ why not say ‘megamillionaires’? You don’t want to include farmers who have two million dollars of land. It’s about perception.” Garst’s comment set off a discussion about who qualified as rich. There was a quick exchange about the threshold

for the “0.1 per cent,” which someone said was around thirty-two million dollars, and the “0.01 per cent,” which another person said was seven hundred million or eight hundred million dollars. Alan Davis, who runs a family foundation, said that, although polling has shown that people consider five hundred thousand dollars in income to be rich, two lawyers living together in an expensive city on that sum might not

be truly wealthy. “People are trying to come up with the right kind of language,” he said. “Five hundred thousand is ‘affluent,’ two million is ‘rich,’ and ten million is ‘mega rich.’” Everyone agreed that it was a tricky issue.

Pearl spoke about some of the group’s recent victories, including its work helping to influence votes on the Raise the Wage Act. “Ideas that seemed crazy, such as a tax on wealth, are now part of the conversation, and our members can take some credit for pushing the needle in that direction,” he said. “I think our group, guided by our staff of seventeen people, is helping our members speak out and make their voices heard, letting them explain that, no, all you guys who read Ayn Rand and couldn’t find Chicago on a map actually don’t know quite as much about what it’s like to be rich as a bunch of actual Patriotic Millionaires who founded businesses, who funded startups, and who met payroll.”

After lunch, I spoke with William (Buz) Battle, a technology executive who told me that he had been raised in a Republican household but that the Trump Administration had driven him to the left. “With the way we’re headed, we need to do more. I need to do more,” he said. I asked him what worried him most. He glanced at his wife, Anne, who was standing next to him. “We could have—I don’t want to say it, but, riots,” he said. “‘Social unrest’ may be a better way of putting it. We’re making life bad for a lot of people. And it’s getting frigging nasty.”

Could inequality in the U.S. really become so severe that it leads to social upheaval? I asked the Stanford historian Walter Scheidel, the author of the 2017 book “The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-first Century,” which argues that violence has been the “single most important means” of reducing, or levelling, wealth and income inequality throughout history. In his book, Scheidel goes back to the end of the Ice Age, when nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes settled into permanent dwellings, which for the first time allowed for the accumulation of wealth that could be passed on to heirs. His research suggests that inequality is inextricably linked to civilization.



America's wealthy élites, when discussing class-based rebellion, often invoke the French Revolution. But, Scheidel said, that kind of disruption is fairly rare. He noted that levelling happens much more often because of the collapse of a state, such as the fall of the Roman Empire; because of deadly pandemics, like the black death of the thirteen-hundreds, which killed so many people that there were labor shortages and workers' wages went up; and because of mass-mobilization warfare, such as the two World Wars. The French may have resolved some of their eighteenth-century economic injustices with the guillotine, but in many other countries across Europe the ruling classes retained power until they were dislodged by the turmoil of the First World War.

Scheidel told me that the extreme political polarization in the U.S. is likely to continue but that the Patriotic Millionaires' fears of violence are probably misplaced. "If they're worried about wholesale collapse and people with pitchforks coming after them, history does not give any indication that that is around the corner," he said. "States are too powerful. States are too good at monitoring dissent. The rich are rich enough to not put themselves in danger." Scheidel said that America's élites should be more concerned about their quality of life. He talked about organized crime, citing Brazil and other countries where members of the upper classes employ armed guards and worry that they or their children might be kidnapped. "That reduces your ability to enjoy your wealth in a civilized way," he said. "You'd still have your stuff, but you'd be limited in your ability to make full use of it. If I were rich, I'd probably be worried about getting to that point."

In September, I met Abigail Disney at her office in Manhattan, just a few blocks from where she lives. The walls are covered in framed photographs—of her children; of the Irish castle, which she now owns; and of meetings that she has had with the likes of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Meryl Streep. A sign on her desk reads "Feminist AF." Disney has an alert, serious face and light-brown hair that falls in unruly curls; she was sitting cross-legged on a pink faux-leather couch and showed



"I don't understand it—no matter how much I drink coffee, play on my phone, refresh my e-mail, look up things online, go to the kitchen for snacks, message my friends, scroll through Twitter, and play with the cats, I still can't get any writing done."

off a few of her tattoos, including a peace dove on the inside of her wrist. She has a slightly defensive way of talking about the comforts she enjoys. She sent her four children to private schools, but she doesn't have a driver. She wears unremarkable clothes. More than once, she cited the Kardashians as a family who feels no shame about "throwing their money around."

Disney told me that she had spent much of her early life feeling detached from her family, both culturally and politically. "They were Red-baiters," she said. "Whenever two workers stood together and had a conversation, that was communism." In 1941, when the Disney animators unionized and went on strike, Walt and Roy took it personally, and Abigail told me that the two men were resentful about it until they died. She said that they practiced a paternalistic form of capitalism, wanting to take care of their employees on their own terms.

Her parents were conservative. "My mother was Fox News before there was Fox News," she said. When I asked Disney about her own politics, she said, "I really don't know why I care about this. I really shouldn't, given my upbringing.

There is no reason why I should give a shit about poor people." As an undergraduate at Yale, she was swept up in leftist movements on campus. "At first, it was about being among the cool people," she admitted. A woman gave her a T-shirt featuring Che Guevara and the words "Viva Los Sandinistas," the Nicaraguan socialist political party that the U.S. had tried to overthrow by backing the right-wing Contras, leading to a decade of civil war in Nicaragua. She wore it constantly. "By the time I graduated from college, I understood that Ronald Reagan was not a good person," she said. "And my parents worshipped the ground he walked on, so that became a very painful thing."

At twenty-one, she gained access to part of her inheritance—between ten million and twenty million dollars—and made what she called a "conscious decision" to live apart from her family. "All of my college life and all of my twenties were spent in a painful process of separation," she said. "I would describe it as no less than agonizing." One of her brothers remained with the family, in Los Angeles, but Disney moved to New York, where she got a Ph.D. in English literature at Columbia. She said

that her parents were embarrassed and angered by her politics. Her father died in 2009, and her mother in 2012.

Her thirties were spent raising her children. Disney said that, when she was in her mid-forties, “I thought, I have no résumé. Why would anyone ever take me seriously? I understood myself to be a person who had no value.” She tried to start a career as a filmmaker, but no one gave much consideration to a Disney heiress. In 2007, she started a production company, Fork Films, which makes movies with a social-justice focus, and the following year she produced her first documentary, “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” about a group of women who helped bring an end to the Liberian civil war. The film won several awards, including Best Documentary

at the Tribeca Film Festival. One of its lead characters, Leymah Gbowee, won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Last year, Disney put together a bid to buy what was left of the Weinstein Company as it prepared to file for Chapter 11 protection. The deal didn’t go through, and instead she co-founded a company called Level Forward, which funds film, theatre, and TV productions led by women and people of color; the company’s first projects included investments in critically acclaimed Broadway shows like “What the Constitution Means to Me,” the 2019 revival of “Oklahoma!,” and “Slave Play.” She said that she is working on a documentary “about economic inequality and the relentless march over the last fifty years toward treating workers incredibly

badly.” When I asked her whether the Disney Company would be a part of it, she declined to answer.

When Erica Payne tracked Disney down one day and urged her to join the Patriotic Millionaires, Disney said to herself, “That’s exactly how I want to use the currency that I have.” She has become one of the group’s most outspoken members. In December, 2017, she appeared in a video attacking the Republican tax bill. In July, 2018, she hosted, with the minister and activist William Barber, a Patriotic Millionaires media conference call to celebrate the passage of the minimum-wage bill in the House.

She sometimes exaggerates. In an interview with Yahoo News this past July, she said that Disney employees had been so underpaid that they were forced to “forage for food in other people’s garbage,” a claim that she later retracted. At a time when political activists are expected to live according to their values, Disney’s role as an ultra-wealthy spokesperson for the underclass makes her a target of vitriol. In late September, someone tweeted at her, “Boy do I despise virtue signaling rich liberal hypocrites living off the money earned by their far better ancestors. Bet you live in a luxury apt in NYC! Why don’t you renounce your corporate grandad’s money and give it ALL away! You never will . . . HYPOCRITE!”

Disney and I discussed another Patriotic Millionaires member, Chuck Collins, the Oscar Mayer heir, who, in 1985, at the age of twenty-six, gave his inheritance away to various environmental and civil-rights organizations. In Disney’s twenties and early thirties, she had considered doing the same. “Honestly, the only reason I didn’t do it was that I was chicken,” she said. “I wish I was a more courageous person.” Over time, she told me, her wealth has grown, and she’s been able to give away much more than she would have if she’d donated it all back then. (She said that her net worth is a hundred and forty million dollars, and that she has given away around sixty-five million dollars. The number is hard to verify; she said that much of it was in the form of grants to social-justice-oriented filmmakers and to organizations that work with low-income populations.) She

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pointed out that her name and wealth are what enable her to talk about poverty in the first place. If she were an unknown person with less money, she said, TV networks wouldn't invite her on the air.

I asked her how she felt about the pledge that billionaires such as Buffett and Bill Gates had signed, promising to donate at least half of their fortunes to philanthropic causes. "I've given away much more than fifty per cent of my net worth, and I don't intend to stop," she said. "And, frankly, if you're a billionaire and only want to give away half of your fortune, something is wrong with you." Disney is wary of the idea that the generosity of individual rich people can solve society's problems. Anand Giridharadas, the author of "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World," has argued that much philanthropy does far more to boost the reputations of the donors than it does to help create a more just society. Such gifts also tend to come with generous tax breaks, meaning that taxpayers are underwriting the donations that get hedge-fund moguls' names put on wings of art museums and hospitals. Instead, Disney wants to convince more people that systemic change is needed. "I get messages like 'You don't know what you're talking about, you've never worked a day in your life!'" she told me. "And I'm, like, You're making my point! I've never worked a day in my life, and look at me! I'm sitting here in total comfort. You can work all your life and you will never find yourself where I am today." She said that she doesn't blame people for being resentful: "I will always be sort of an alien anthropologist looking at poverty from my very rarefied air."

In September, I joined Disney at a dinner to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of United for a Fair Economy, a nonprofit, co-founded by Chuck Collins, that works on economic-justice issues. The dinner was held in the community room of the Old South Church, on Boylston Street, in Boston. After a guided meditation and a rap-and-saxophone performance by the trans activist and musician Jay-Marie Hill, Disney was to be presented with U.F.E.'s inaugural Class Traitor Award.

For most of the evening, Disney sat

at a table near the front of the room, her brow furrowed, scribbling notes on a stack of papers that contained the text of her speech. She wore a navy-blue dress with white skulls printed on it, her tortoiseshell glasses sliding down her nose. Others in the room were helping themselves to rice and beans, but Disney told me that she was too nervous to eat. Instead, she drank a few glasses of Chardonnay. Finally, shortly after 9 P.M., three hours into the proceedings, she was introduced by Mike Lapham, a tall, wiry man who heads U.F.E.'s Responsible Wealth project. Lapham spoke about Disney's support for preserving the estate tax, and how she had helped push for a millionaire tax in New York. "She's passionate, she's fearless, she's fierce," Lapham said. "She's an inspiration to so many other rich people to become class traitors."

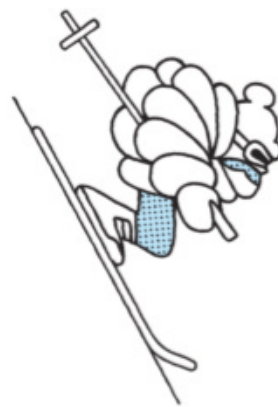
As the audience applauded, Disney climbed onstage, clutching her notes. "I love every single person in here," she said. "I came from a place that shouldn't have led me here, and, every time I find myself being led here one way or another, it feels so good to be alive. I just want to thank all of you for the work that you do, and the way that the work that you do gives me meaning." For a moment, the room was quiet, and there was a sense, as there sometimes is when Disney is talking about her wealth and her ambitions, that she might have misread the room. But Disney, who is mostly aware of the unease she causes, tries to use it to her advantage. She looked into the crowd and said, "Now I'm going to start the official part of my speech, and I want to watch you all squirm when I say it. Are you ready?" She paced in a small circle, then leaned toward the audience. "I'm riiiiich," she intoned. She paused before asking, "Did I make you all really uncomfortable?" The shame attached to such an admission, she said, has motivated rich people to isolate themselves from the rest of society: "In their hearts, they know that something is inherently wrong with what they have, as compared with what everybody else has." She said that she was hopeful that the country was finally

waking up from a "fifty-year fever dream" of market-driven economic policy. After her speech, Lapham presented her with a plaque bearing a quote attributed to the aboriginal artist Lilla Watson: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Later that night, Disney boarded a JetBlue flight back to New York. She had been running from meeting to meeting since early that morning, pulling a pink Wonder Woman suitcase behind her. On the flight, she started talking about how we got to the current moment in American politics, naming figures ranging from Martin Luther King, Jr., to Mar-

garet Thatcher and Milton Friedman. She recalled a conversation that she'd had, in 2013, with David Keene, who was the president of the National Rifle Association from 2011 to 2013. Disney had asked him what he was proudest of. He told her, "We flipped the script on guns in America." She took heart in the simplicity of his answer: if the script could be flipped one way, then surely it could be flipped back. She said that groups like the Patriotic Millionaires, and people like Erica Payne and Chuck Collins, "are tiny little ants in this fight" in terms of their total resources. But the other side is selling "a load of bullshit," she said. "If what you're selling is bullshit, then you need a shovel, and if what you're selling is truth you really only need a teaspoon."

She spoke admiringly of the activists who populated the social-justice world. "If I feel good, that doesn't undermine the credibility of what I do," she said. "And I do feel good doing it. I am the happiest rich lady you will ever meet." Why, I asked Disney, did she have faith that things would get better, when there was so much evidence to the contrary? "I always keep coming back to the idea that you just keep investing in the future," she said. "Despair would be easier if I were less comfortable. But, if I were to lose my hope, where does that leave the people around me? I feel a responsibility. I don't know how to do it any other way." ♦



PORTFOLIO

A BOY LIKE THAT

Reimagining “West Side Story” for the twenty-first century.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLLIER SCHORR

When “West Side Story” debuted, in 1957, critics praised its lush, syncopated score, by Leonard Bernstein; its sardonic lyrics, by Stephen Sondheim; and the profane energy of Arthur Laurents’s script. But the choreography of Jerome Robbins, who also directed the musical, was its greatest revelation: his finger-snapping gang members seamlessly combined ballet moves with the body language of the street. In the subsequent six decades, some critics have suggested that the show’s portrayal of gang warfare was a bit romantic. Others have noted that the creators weren’t versed in Latino culture. Nevertheless, whenever “West Side Story” was revived on Broadway, the Sharks and the Jets moved exactly as Robbins had imagined them.

So when it was announced that a new Broadway production would open in February, staged by the Belgian director Ivo van Hove, it came as a surprise that the revival would feature choreography by the avant-garde formalist Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. The longtime head of a heralded dance school in Brussels, De Keersmaeker designs meticulous, geometric dances that often consist of movements repeated in a loop. She has a Bach obsession. She is not an obvious choice for “West Side Story.”

And yet, as several members of the new cast recently explained, De Keersmaeker, like Robbins, has a knack for fusing formal movement and everyday gesture. Her piece “Rosas Danst Rosas,” from 1983, is a portrait of pent-up frustration: four young women in gray gym clothes, sitting on wooden chairs, slump over theatrically, whip back their hair, and tug at their sleeves, exposing their shoulders. (Beyoncé has acknowledged, under legal pres-

sure, that the dance inspired the video for her song “Countdown.”)

Madison Vomastek, who plays a Jet named Velma, has never danced a piece by Robbins, but she has loved De Keersmaeker’s work ever since she saw “Rosas” online, when she was thirteen. At a recent rehearsal, De Keersmaeker suggested borrowing some of the “Rosas” gestures for the Jets. “My heart burst open!” Vomastek said.

The new “West Side Story” is set in the present day. Vomastek noted of the choreography, “The one key difference I notice is the snapping—it’s gone.” Zuri Noelle Ford, who plays another Jet, Anybodys, explained that some gang members now carry iPhones. One dancer in each gang captures onstage action with a Steadicam; the footage is displayed on a screen behind the performers. The Jets, Ford said, are no longer all white: “It’s a group of white and black and mixed people. It’s 2020, you know?” The Jets’ movements incorporate house and hip-hop—“things that were created in this country,” Ricky Ubeda, who plays Indio, said.

The Sharks, like most of the actors playing them, are of Latino descent; their dances have Afro-Caribbean inflections. Yesenia Ayala, who plays Anita, grew up in a Colombian family outside Charlotte, North Carolina. She told me that van Hove has worried more about perpetuating Latin stereotypes than she has. “That’s just how we are,” she said. “I love salsa dancing. I love to be loud. I talk with my hands a lot.” She shrugged. “You can’t take that away.”

—Emily Stokes

Dharon E. Jones, a student at Ithaca College, plays Action, a member of the Jets.



Members of the Sharks, led by Anita, played by Yesenia Ayala. Typically, the women in “West Side Story” are “in skirts, and very sassy and flirtatious,” Ayala said. This production, she said, asks, “Why do we have to be sexy? Can’t we just be powerful?”







Above: Sheldon True, who plays Toro, a Shark. Right: Sharks and Jets surround Bernardo, played by Amar Ramasar. The Sharks' movements have elements of salsa and Afro-Caribbean dance.







Left: Marlon Feliz, who plays Estella, a Shark. Above, top row: Jennifer Gruener, Michelle Mercedes. Bottom row: Madison Vomastek, Zuri Noelle Ford. All four women play Jets. Ford said of her character, Anybodys, "She walks the line between femininity and masculinity."



Above: Isaac Powell stars as Tony, the latter-day Romeo. Right: Shereen Pimentel, who plays Maria, performs "A Boy Like That/I Have a Love" with Ayala. Following page: The Jets carry the bodies of Tony and Riff, played by Ben Cook.







PLAYING METAL GEAR SOLID V:

THE PHANTOM PAIN



JAMIL JAN KOCHAI

First, you have to gather the cash to preorder the game at the local GameStop, where your cousin works, and, even though he hooks it up with the employee discount, the game is still a bit out of your price range because you've been using your Taco Bell paychecks to help your pops, who's been out of work since you were ten, and who makes you feel unbearably guilty about spending money on useless hobbies while kids in Kabul are destroying their bodies to build compounds for white businessmen and warlords—but, shit, it's Kojima, it's Metal Gear, so, after scrimping and saving (like literal dimes you're picking up off the street), you've got the cash, which you give to your cousin, who purchases the game on your behalf, and then, on the day it's released, you just have to find a way to get to the store.

But, because your oldest brother has taken the Civic to Sac State, you're hauling your two-hundred-and-sixty-pound ass on a bicycle you haven't touched since middle school, and thank Allah (if He's up there) that the bike is still rideable, because you're sure there'll be a line if you don't get to GameStop early, so, huffing and puffing, you're regretting all the Taco Bell you've eaten over the past two years, but you ride with such fervor that you end up being only third in line, and it's your cousin himself who hands you the game in a brown paper bag, as if it were something illegal or illicit, which it isn't, of course, it's Metal Gear, it's Kojima, it's the final game in a series so fundamentally a part of your childhood that often, when you hear the Irish Gaelic chorus from "The Best Is Yet to Come," you cannot help weeping softly into your keyboard.

For some reason, riding back home is easier.

You leave the bike behind the trash cans at the side of the house and hop the wooden fence into the back yard and, if the door to the garage is open, you slip in, and if it's not, which it isn't, you've got to take a chance on the screen door in the back yard, but, lo and behold, your father is ankle deep in the dirt, hunched over, yanking at weeds with his bare hands the way he used to as a farmer in Logar, before war and famine forced him to flee to the western coast of the American empire, where

he labored for many years until it broke his body for good, and even though his doctor has forbidden him to work in the yard, owing to the torn nerves in his neck and spine—which, you know from your mother, were first damaged when he was tortured by Russians shortly after the murder of his younger brother, Watak, during the Soviet War—he is out here clawing at the earth and its spoils, as if he were digging for treasure or his own grave.

Spotting you only four feet away from the sliding glass door, he gestures for you to come over, and though you are tired and sweaty, with your feet aching and the most important game of the decade hidden inside your underwear, you approach him.

He signals for you to crouch down beside him, then he runs his dirty fingers through his hair until flakes of his scalp fall onto his shoulders and his beard.

This isn't good.

When your father runs his hands through his hair, it is because he has forgotten his terrible, flaking dandruff, which he forgets only during times of severe emotional or physical distress, which means that he is about to tell you a story that is either upsetting or horrifying or both, which isn't fair, because you are a son and not a therapist.

Your father is a dark, sturdy man, and so unlike you that, as a child, you were sure that one day Hagrid would come to your door and inform you of your status as a Mudblood, and then your true life—the life without the weight of your father's history, pain, guilt, hopelessness, helplessness, judgment, and shame—would begin.

Your father asks you where you were.

"The library."

"You have to study?"

You tell him you do, which isn't, technically, a lie.

"All right," he says in English, because he has given up on speaking to you in Pashto, "but, after you finish, come back down. I have something I need to talk to you about."

Hurry.

When you get to your room, you lock the door and turn up MF Doom on your portable speaker to ward off mothers, fathers, grandmothers, sisters, and brothers who want to harp at you

about prayer, the Quran, Pashto, Farsi, a new job, new classes, exercise, basketball, jogging, talking, guests, chores, homework help, bathroom help, family time, time, because usually "Mad-villainy" does the trick.

Open the brown paper bag and toss the kush your cousin has stashed with your game because he needs a new smoking buddy since his best friend gave up the ganja for God again, and he sees you as a prime target, probably because he thinks you've got nothing better to do with your time or you're not as religious as your brothers or you're desperate to escape the unrelenting nature of a corporeal existence, and, God damn, the physical map of Afghanistan that comes with the game is fucking beautiful.

Not that you're a patriot or a nationalist or one of those Afghans who walk around in a pakol and kameez and play the tabla and claim that their favorite singer is Ahmad Zahir, but the fact that nineteen-eighties Afghanistan is the final setting of the most legendary and artistically significant gaming franchise in the history of time made you all the more excited to get your hands on it, especially since you've been shooting at Afghans in your games (Call of Duty and Battlefield and Splinter Cell) for so long that you've become oddly immune to the self-loathing you felt when you were first massacring wave after wave of militant fighters who looked just like your father.

Now, finally, start the game.

After you escape from the hospital where Big Boss was recovering from the explosion he barely survived in the prequel to the Phantom Pain, you and Revolver Ocelot travel to the brutal scenes of northern Kabul Province—its rocky cliffs, its dirt roads, and its sunlight bleeding off into the dark mountains just the way you remember from all those years ago, when you visited Kabul as a child—and although your initial mission is to locate and extract Kazuhira Miller, the Phantom Pain is the first Metal Gear Solid game to be set in a radically open-world environment, and you decide to postpone the rescue of Kazuhira Miller until after you get some Soviet blood on your hands, a feat you accomplish promptly by locating and massacring

an entire base of Russian combatants.

Your father, you know, didn't kill a single Russian during his years as a mujahideen in Logar, but there is something in the act of slaughtering these Soviet N.P.C.s that makes you feel connected to him and his history of warfare.

Thinking of your father and his small village, you head south to explore the outer limits of the open world in the Phantom Pain, crossing trails and deserts and mountain passes, occasionally stopping at a checkpoint or a military barracks to slaughter more Russians, and you find yourself, incredibly, skirt-ing the city of Kabul, still dominated by the Soviets, and continuing on to Logar, to Mohammad Agha, and when you get to Wagh Jan, the roadside-market village that abuts the Kabul-Logar highway, just the way you remember it, you hitch your horse and begin to sneak along the clay compounds and the shops, climbing walls and crawling atop roofs, and, whenever a local Afghan spots you, you knock him out with a tranquilizer, until you make it to the bridge that leads to the inner corridors of your parents' home village, Naw'e Kaleh, which looks so much like the photos and your own blurred memories from the trip when you were a kid that you begin to become uneasy, not yet afraid, but as if consumed by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

Sneaking along the dirt roads, past the golden fields and the apple orchards and the mazes of clay compounds, you come upon the house where your father used to reside, and it is there—on the road in front of your father's home—that you spot Watak, your father's sixteen-year-old brother, whom you recognize only because his picture (unsmiling, head shaved, handsome, and sixteen forever) hangs on the wall of the room in your home where your parents pray, but here he is, in your game, and you press Pause and you set down the controller, and now you are afraid.

Sweat is running down your legs in rivulets, in streams, your heart is thumping, and you are wondering if sniffing the kush as you did earlier has got you high.

You look out the window and see your brother walking toward the house

WARBLER

The dead warbler started to sing
as she whom I love
bent down to pick him up with two reluctant fingers,
maybe the small finger (of the left hand)
curling, as at dinner,
and carry him home
and quietly put him
into a see-through plastic bag
as she did for salmon and roast chicken and pie.

I want to say "alas poor warbler"
but warblers die too,
of disease, of age, of accidents,
as all birds do.

And like all birds
they sing when they're buried,
in this case in the freezer,
a cold graveyard,
two cartons of ice cream,
one vanilla, one dulce de leche,
to remember him by.

He was lifelike stiff and unapologetic
and he sang from time to time, dead or not,
a "rising trill," as the book says,
in the upper levels where the worms are.

—Gerald Stern

in the dark and you realize that you've
been playing for too long.

You're blinking a lot.

Too much.

You notice that your room is a mess
and that it smells like ass and that you've
become so accustomed to its smell and
its mess that from the space inside your
head, behind your eyes, the space in which
your first-person P.O.V. is rooted, you—

Ignore the knock.

It's just your little sister.

Get back to the game.

There is a bearded, heavyset man
beside Watak, who, you soon realize, is
your father.

You pause the game again and put
down the controller.

Doom spits, "His life is like a folk-
lore legend. . . . Why you so stiff, you
need to smoke more, bredrin. . . . In-
stead of trying to riff with the broke
war veteran."

It seems to you a sign.

You extract the kush from the trash,
and, because you have no matches or
lighter, you put hunks of it in your mouth
and you chew and nearly vomit twice.

Return to the game.

Hiding in your grandfather's mul-
berry tree, you listen to your father and
his brother discuss what they will eat
for suhoor, thereby indicating that it is
still Ramadan, that this is just days be-
fore Watak's murder.

Then it hits you.

Here is what you're going to do:
before your father is tortured and his
brother murdered, you are going to tran-
quillize them both and you are going
to carry them to your horse and cross
Logar's terrain until you reach a safe
spot where you can call a helicopter and
fly them back to your offshore platform:
Mother Base.

But just as you load your tranquil-
izers your brother bangs on your door
and demands that you come out, and

after ignoring him for a bit, which only makes him madder and louder, you shout that you are sick, but the voice that comes out of your mouth is not your own, it is the voice of a faraway man imitating your voice, and your brother can tell.

He leaves, and you return to the game.

From the cover of the mulberry tree, you aim your tranquillizer gun, but you forget that you've got the laser scope activated, and Watak sees the red light flashing on your father's forehead and they're off, running and firing back at your tree with rifles they had hidden underneath their patus, and you are struck twice, so you need a few moments to recover your health and, by the time you do, they're gone.

Your brother is back, and this time he has brought along your oldest brother, who somehow is able to shout louder and bang harder than your second-oldest brother, and they're both asking what you're doing and why you won't come out and why you won't grow up and why you insist on worrying your mother and your father, who you know gets those terrible migraines triggered by stress, and now your oldest brother is banging so hard you're afraid the door will come off its hinges, so you lug your dresser in front of it as a barricade and then you go back to your spot in front of the TV, and you sit on the floor and press Play.

At night, under cover of darkness, you sneak toward your father's compound, and you scale the fifteen-foot-high walls of clay and crawl along the rooftops until you get to the highest point in the compound, where your father stands, on the lookout for incoming jets and firebombs, and you shoot him twice in the back with tranquillizers and, as he is falling, you catch him in your arms, your father, who, at this time, is around the same age that you are now, and in the dark, on the roof of the compound that he will lose to this war, you hold him, his body still strong and well, his heart unbroken, and you set him down gently on the clay so that the sky does not swallow him.

Climbing down into the courtyard, you go from chamber to chamber, spotting uncles and aunts and cousins you've never met in real life, and you find Watak near the cow's shed, sleeping just behind

the doorway of a room filled with women, as if to protect them, and, after you aim your tranquillizer gun and send Watak into a deeper sleep, your grandmother, a lifelong insomniac, rises from her toshak and strikes you in the shoulder with a machete and calls for the men in the house, of whom there are many, to awaken and slaughter the Russian who has come to kill us all in our sleep.

The damage from the machete is significant.

Nonetheless, you still have the strength to tranquillize your grandmother, pick up Watak, and climb back onto the roof while all your uncles and cousins and even your grandfather are awakened and armed and begin to fire at your legs as you hustle along, bleeding and weary, to the spot where your father rests.

With your uncle on one shoulder and your father on the other, you leap off the roof into the shadows of an apple orchard.

The men are pouring out onto the roads and the fields, calling upon neighbors and allies, and, because the orchard is soon surrounded on all sides, it seems certain that you will be captured, but you are saved by, of all things, a squadron of Spetsnaz, who begin to fire on the villagers, and in the confusion of the shoot-out, as the entire village is lit up by a hundred gunfights, each fight a microcosm of larger battles and wars and global conflicts strung together by the invisible wires of beloved men who will die peacefully in their sleep, you make your way out of the orchard, passing trails and streams and rivers and mulberry trees, until you reach your horse and ride out of Wagh Jan, toward an extraction point in the nearby Black Mountains.

But now, at the door, is your father. "Zoya?" he is saying, very gently, the way he used to say it when you were a kid, when you were in Logar, when you got the flu, when the pills and the I.V. and the home remedies weren't working, when there was nothing to do but wait for the aching to ebb, and your father was there, maybe in the orchard, maybe on the veranda, and he was holding you in his lap, running his fingers

through your hair, and saying your name, the way he is saying it now, as if it were almost a question.

"Zoya?" he says and, when you do not reply, nothing else.

Keep going.

Russians chase you on the ground and in the air, they fire and you are struck once, twice, three or four times, and there are so many Russians, but your horse is quick and nimble and manages the terrain better than their trucks can, and you make it to the extraction point, in a hollow of the Black Mountains, with enough time to summon the helicopter and to set up a perimeter of mines, and you hide your father and his brother at the mouth of a cave, behind a large boulder the shape of a believer in prostration, where you lie prone with a sniper rifle and begin to pick off Russian paratroopers in the distance, and you fire at the engines of the trucks and ignore the tanks, which will reach you last, and it is mere moments before your helicopter will arrive, and, just as you think you are going to make it, your horse is slaughtered in a flurry of gunfire and your pilot is struck by a single bullet from a lone rifleman, and the helicopter falls to the earth and bursts into flames, killing many Russians, and giving you just

enough time to rush into the cave, into the heart of the Black Mountains.

With your father on one shoulder and your uncle on the other, and with the lights of the Soviet gunfire dying away at the outer edges of your vision, you trudge deeper into the darkness of the cave, and though you cannot be sure that your father and his brother are still alive, that they haven't been shot in the chaos, that they are not, now, corpses, you feel compelled to keep moving into a darkness so complete that your reflection becomes visible on the screen of the television in front of you, and it is as if the figures in the image were journeying inside you, delving into your flesh.

To be saved. ♦



NEWYORKER.COM

Jamil Jan Kochai on the intimate alienation of video games.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

EXCLUDE ME IN

In the seventies, a group of Asian-American writers decided it was their turn.

BY HUA HSU

In August of 1972, the *Times* reporter Ralph Blumenthal was working on an article about theatre in New York's Chinatown. He was focussing on the challenges faced by performers who had recently emigrated from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They were shut out of mainstream productions, and the grassroots theatre scene was still maturing. Blumenthal's editor asked a colleague named Frank Ching, who presumably knew a bit more about that part of town, to look the piece over. Ching felt that Blumenthal cast the broader Chinese-American population as foreign. He recommended some more interesting artists to Blumenthal, who ended up including a parenthetical mention of an up-and-coming playwright named Frank Chin. Ching likely believed that he was doing a favor for Chin, whose "Chicken Coop Chinaman" had opened at the American Place Theatre months earlier. At the very least, Ching must have felt that he had helped sneak an edgier name into an otherwise drab roundup. But Chin was furious to be included at all.

Chin, who considered himself a fifth-generation Chinese-American, wrote Ching a letter complaining about seeing his name in Blumenthal's piece alongside the "Chinese from China." Ching didn't understand why Chin felt so aggrieved, and responded that "the average person's" conflation of newer immigrants with those who had been in America for generations was "understandable," a reflection of ignorance but not of outright racism. Their interest in Chinatown was something to work with. Chin disagreed. "As far as I'm concerned," he replied, "Americanized Chinese who've

come over in their teens and later to settle here and American born Chinaman [sic] have nothing in common, culturally, intellectually, emotionally." Ching reprinted their back-and-forth in *Bridge*, a magazine based in Chinatown that he helped oversee. As its title suggested, *Bridge* set out to explore the diasporic bonds of the Chinese in America. Although Chin had explored Chinatown in his plays and in a documentary, he also wanted to be recognized as something different. He and his friends were sketching out the contours of a new identity that had emerged in the late sixties: Asian-American.

Identity politics offers a voluntary response to an involuntary situation. Power structures beyond our grasp sort us according to categories not of our own choosing, predestining us to be seen in a certain way by (as Ching might put it) "the average person." Choosing to call oneself an Asian-American, rather than answering to "Oriental," makes the most of an imposition. It offers some people a ready-made sense of purpose, short-circuiting the power of an epithet imposed from without. Students and activists in California invented this term in the late sixties, inspired by Black Power and similar movements among Native Americans and Chicanos, and those involved in Third World Liberation. They ultimately emphasized what connected different Asian-immigrant communities and their struggles: efforts to resist gentrification and alleviate poverty, the anti-war movement, stereotypes about Asians as passive or perpetually foreign. The term implied a set of shared historical



KEN GAETJEN; ABOVE: SERGE BLOCH

Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson



Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, and Chan's daughter Jennifer, photographed near San Quentin State Prison, in Marin County.

conditions. Where to go next was an open question.

Chin and Ching weren't the first people to debate the merits of Asian-American assimilation, though Chin might have been the first to put this debate in such colorful terms. He felt that many Chinese-American writers were interested in being "prizewinning poodles" answering the beck and call of "the master race." What's more, he thought the literature that *Bridge* occasionally published was "shit." "If the purpose of BRIDGE is to bind me to the immigrants," Chin wrote, "I'm not interested in being bound."

Chin felt bound, instead, to other writers who were eager to explore this new identity. One of his early advocates was the black writer Ishmael Reed. Chin had befriended Jeffery Paul Chan and Shawn Wong, and, in 1970, the three met Lawson Fusao Inada at a party that Reed hosted. Chan and Wong wrote fiction; Inada was a poet. Alongside their own writing, they dug for older works, scouring libraries and used-book stores for predecessors. They felt as though American culture had wrecked their brains, leaving many of their peers awash in self-contempt. In the process of excavation and creation, they were testing out their own theories of what this new identity could mean. Reed called them the Four Horsemen of Asian-American literature. Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong founded the Combined Asian American Resources Project in order to preserve the literary history that they were piecing together. They soon felt that they had found as much as anyone had.

Besides, they were less interested in uncovering historical precursors than in starting something new. In the fifties and sixties, writers like C. Y. Lee and Betty Lee Sung had tasted success, becoming models of hardworking Asian-Americans dealing with identity crises. They took for granted the task of successful assimilation; they did not ask why, or on whose terms. The Chinese writer Lin Yutang, who first lived in the U.S. as a graduate student at Harvard, had experienced American success in the thirties as a kind of spokesperson for Chinese manners and civilization. In 1948, he published "Chinatown Family," one of the first novels about Chinatown written by someone

of Chinese descent. Yet he actually knew very little about the Chinese-American experience. His editor, a white man, fed him details that he plugged into his domestic drama. Successes like these embodied what Chan and Chin termed "racist love," their lively framing of the model-minority myth. American readers accepted Asian authors, Chan and Chin argued, as long as they conformed to stereotypes of social passivity.

The Four Horsemen had no interest in being loved, especially by white people. Chin, in particular, was sensitive about grammar and the gatekeepers' ideas of "good English." When an editor asked to tidy some grammatical errors, he called her the "great white bitch goddess priestess of the sacred white mouth." To follow the guidance of mainstream American culture, he thought, was to accede to self-hatred. He wanted the freedom to write in a "badmouth" style full of slangy extravagances, the frenetic energy of someone forging armor out of junk.

Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong shopped an anthology to major publishing houses. "It isn't enough to celebrate it (the writing) merely because it is by Asian American writers," one publisher told them, suggesting that they keep only the "least ethnic" pieces; the collection wasn't "commanding" enough. Others expressed interest in terms that felt condescending. Reed offered them a chance to approach Asian-American culture with the irreverence he brought to the black experience. He published them in his "Yardbird" anthologies, and in 1974 his friend Charles Harris, the head of the newly established Howard University Press, published "Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers." "Asian America," Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong wrote in the book's preface, "so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!!" This sound was "more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice."

Anthologies offer us previews of how society is changing. A community has consolidated; a movement has distinguished itself from what came before. Perhaps this emerging cohort

of writers stands in for a social wave that's about to crest. "The New Negro: An Interpretation," edited by Alain Locke and published in 1925, captured the excitement, possibility, and complexities of the Harlem Renaissance by offering a cross-sectional taste of all the work being produced under its banner. Decades later, the Black Arts Movement became synonymous with the anthology "Black Fire," published in 1968 and edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Following the cultural movements of the sixties, publishers became increasingly interested in such collections as they began exploring ways to reach new and younger audiences. The party where the Four Horsemen had met was for Reed's "19 Necromancers from Now," a 1970 collection showcasing multicultural writing that was formally and substantively radical.

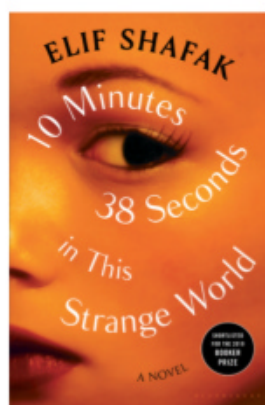
Anthologies are an assertion of critical mass: *We are here*. They give emerging communities shape, a name, a kind of portability. It's hard to imagine contemporary feminism without the visionary collections published in the early eighties by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, like "This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color," edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, and "Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology," edited by Barbara Smith. Yet, as greatest-hits collections, they are canon-building by nature. Defining a scene requires you to make an argument about all those who will be left out, too. So anthologies also announce: *We are the ones you should regard, not them*. At first, the mere gesture of naming a new community perhaps sufficed. Before "Aiiieeeee!," there were other anthologies, like Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas's "Asian-American Authors" (1972) and David Hsin-fu Wand's "Asian-American Heritage" (1974), which described a community negotiating the "Asian tradition of their ancestors and the American tradition of their current homeland."

"Aiiieeeee!" featured some of the authors who appeared in these previous books. But it was far more polemical, far more focussed on patrolling the borders than on examining the commonalities shared by those safely within them. To be Asian-American, the ed-

itors wrote, was to possess a “sensibility.” It was something that you understood instinctively as a consequence of growing up in America, without any real relationship to Asia beyond what one gleaned from “the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture.” The “Aiiieeeee!” editors didn’t care much about representation in the crude demographic sense, which could be tokenizing. They had particular scorn for the “yellow goons” promoting perspectives that were “actively inoffensive” to the white mainstream. They bristled at how Asians were often described as having an “inner resource,” some primordial connection to the centuries-old civilizations of a mystical Orient long idealized in the West. This was why, they thought, Asian-Americans were always described as having a “dual heritage” or “dual personality,” and thus as being part alien, even after having been here for generations.

As the scholar Tara Fickle notes in her foreword to a new edition of “Aiiieeeee!” (University of Washington Press), the book has been remembered almost exclusively for its brash introductory essays. Alongside the provocatively vague definition of Asian America, the essays are full of bold claims, some of which have aged poorly. “Asian-Americans are not one people but several—Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans,” the editors wrote in the preface. (So much for Korean-Americans or Vietnamese-Americans, say.) And these groups, according to the editors, had collectively published “fewer than ten works of fiction and poetry.”

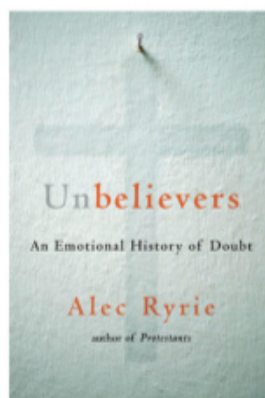
The excerpted works that followed were far more eclectic than the opening polemics suggested. This was especially true of the fiction written in the forties and fifties, in pursuit of horizons that were forgotten once their authors were absorbed into latter-day categories of identity. There are a few pages from John Okada’s “No-No Boy,” a slow-building 1957 novel about a young Japanese-American who, after the Second World War, is searching for a way to express his psychological anguish. We get a taste of the early disenchantments that propel Carlos



10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World, by *Elif Shafak* (Bloomsbury). Imagining the life behind a newspaper story—the discovery of a murdered prostitute in a dumpster in Istanbul—this kaleidoscopic novel celebrates the vibrancy of its protagonist, Leila. She flees her home city to escape sexual abuse only to be sold immediately into sex work. During the final moments of her life, Leila revisits memories of loss and love; afterward, her five closest friends give her the burial she deserves. Although Leila’s life is suffused with tragedy, Shafak focusses on her loyalty and charm, on the joy that she finds in her relationships, and on the eccentricities of Istanbul.



Agent Running in the Field, by *John le Carré* (Viking). The prolific eighty-eight-year-old author’s latest novel, a tense story laced with nostalgia, tackles Brexit, Russian electoral interference, and President Trump, “Putin’s shithouse cleaner.” Nat, a pro-European journeyman spy in his late forties, considers Britain to be in “free fall,” but when he takes charge of a rundown substation that manages Russian defectors he continues his job of convincing others to betray their own country in favor of one in which he has little faith. The young people in his orbit provide foils to his pursuits: his nineteen-year-old daughter considers patriotism “a curse on mankind,” and his badminton partner follows up their matches with diatribes against Britain’s and America’s journey “straight down the road to institutional racism and neo-fascism.”



Unbelievers, by *Alec Ryrie* (Belknap/Harvard). By the time Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead, this book argues, the “emotional shape” of unbelief was long in place, and with it the forces that disseminate Western secularism. Ryrie traces the root of religious skepticism to the anger, the anxiety, and the “desperate search for certainty” that drove thinkers like the religious poet John Donne to grapple with church dogma. They did not always manage to hold on to their faith, and their probing undermined religion from within. The currents of atheism were stirred not by the levelheaded philosophers of a later era but by these seekers’ struggle, and occasional failure, to “doubt wisely.”



Sleeveless, by *Natasha Stagg* (Semiotexte). These essays examine the white bourgeois milieu of present-day tastemakers in downtown New York, with detours into adjacent topics, such as music festivals and influencers. Stagg’s depictions of the worlds of art, fashion, media, and night life draw on both cultural theory and deadpan personal anecdote, and are notable for a sense of distance and ambivalence. The lives she evokes—devoted to that most chimerical, evanescent quality “cool”—play out in a ceaseless round of nebulous achievements and vapid, exclusive parties. They seem empty, sad, and interesting, in equal measure. In one account, Stagg recalls a stint consulting for a tech startup whose executives keep asking if given celebrities are cool. “Um, cool? Depends on, like, your audience,” she replies.

Bulosan's "America Is in the Heart," a 1946 novel that tracks the gradual political awakening of a migrant laborer from the Philippines as he bounces around the West Coast. An excerpt from Louis Chu's "Eat a Bowl of Tea" is full of the lewd humor that made the novel, from 1961, such a striking depiction of Chinatown life. One of the most intriguing pieces is "Rough Notes for Mantos," a lyrical essay about queer desire masquerading as a short story. It was written by Russell Leong but was published under the name Wallace Lin.

"Aiiieeeee!" was fairly successful, reviewed by *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*, as well as *Bridge*, where a writer named Bill Wong wondered who, exactly, the book was for. He felt that the editors' attempt to define Asian America in such "limited" and "arcane" terms would confuse most people. For better or worse, "Aiiieeeee!" set the terms for debating the community's parameters for decades. The editors believed that Asian-Americans could move forward politically only once they realized how the art and culture around them had stunted their imaginations: if you gained a popular audience, you were probably a sellout. Later generations read their bluster as embittered rage. But they wanted to start conversations, not close them. At least, this was the initial hope. "We know each other now," they wrote, referring to an emerging sense of solidarity among young and old Asian-American writers. "It should never have been otherwise."

In 1976, Knopf published Maxine Hong Kingston's first book, "The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts." She had a lot in common with the "Aiiieeeee!" editors, including a wariness toward the American culture that had diminished their sense of possibility: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chi-

nese tradition and what is the movies?"

Kingston's publisher designated "The Woman Warrior" as nonfiction, even though the book's stories involve time travel and the supernatural. It appeared during a period when publishers had become interested in previously marginalized voices, particularly ones that might educate a broader, white mainstream. Kingston's book gorgeously blurred the line between historical and first-person perspectives. It felt raw and intimate, expanding the reader's sense of what it meant to write memoir. Her book relied on "talk-story," a kind of improvisational storytelling technique that allowed her to shuttle back and forth between the banal, everyday life of Californians in the mid-century and Chinese heroines of bygone epochs. "The Woman Warrior" won the National Book Critics Circle Award in the category of nonfiction. It's been a presence on college campuses ever since.

Kingston's success presented a conundrum. Her book was dense and disorienting, coy and lyrical, bearing little resemblance to the bland Asian-American best-sellers of previous decades. Her Asian-American critics, like Jeffery Chan and Benjamin Tong, accused her of inauthenticity, willfully mistranslating Chinese stories and customs to appeal to a white readership. They were frustrated by how she catered to popular appetites for ethnic autobiography. Frank Chin argued that first-person writing was a vestige of Christian conquest, when heathens would demonstrate their worth by participating in stories of self-discovery and consciousness. He described

"The Woman Warrior" as "another in a long line of Chinkie autobiographies by Pocahontas yellows blowing the same old mixed up East/West soul struggle." This kind of self-representation, he argued, was a Western construct, and its focus on Chinese misogyny, or the "icky-gooey evil" of Chinese culture, was a self-indulgent play to please white readers.

Chin and Kingston's conflict unfolded over years. In time, it came to

obscure some of the original questions that had animated the "Aiiieeeee!" editors. Kingston's writing was expansive and generous, making anything feel possible, while "Aiiieeeee!" was seen as border patrol. But the debate "Aiiieeeee!" initiated was ultimately not about the real versus the fake. It was about the marketplace—its power to anoint, its capacity to ossify the ephemeral thing that your literature is trying to articulate in the first place.

Kingston, like Chin, was born in 1940 and was raised in California. But, where Chin described himself as a fifth-generation Chinese-American, Kingston was the daughter of immigrants. Part of the reason "The Woman Warrior" was so palatable to mainstream readers was that it could be read as a story of the traumas associated with immigrant assimilation. Perhaps these wounds might even compel a young woman to retreat into folktales, to rewrite odes of the distant past. Family bonds, the psychology of immigrant households, estrangement from the mother tongue: these became the defining themes of Asian-American literature, in part because they were market-tested.

When, in 1991, Chin and his collaborators decided to publish a new anthology of Chinese- and Japanese-American writing, titled "The Big Aiiieeeee!," Chin contributed an opening essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." The wounded masculinity that had been on the fringes of "Aiiieeeee!" was now more pronounced. And one sure way of earning Chin's scorn as a "fake" was by finding a big audience or winning awards, as had David Henry Hwang (whose Tony-winning play, "M. Butterfly," premiered on Broadway in 1988) and Amy Tan (whose best-selling novel "The Joy Luck Club" appeared in 1989). It's not that the Four Horsemen had failed in their own careers. Chin won prizes and accolades for his plays and novels, and he was the subject of a 2005 documentary. Inada was named the poet laureate of Oregon in 2006. Chan continued to write fiction and teach literature at San Francisco State University, where he had started an Asian-American-studies program. And Wong published two



acclaimed novels, “Homebase” (1979) and “American Knees” (1995). But their successes didn’t reshape popular culture the way Tan’s “Joy Luck Club” did. Asian-American literature was growing, even as the ranks of the “Aiiieeeee!” hard-liners were shrinking. Kingston rarely acknowledged Chin’s aggression, though she did publish a novel, “Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book,” in which she tried to understand the psyche of an angry young Chinese-American man from the Bay Area who happens to be a playwright. If he’s sending me hate mail, Kingston later said, I’m sending him love letters.

Earlier this year, John Okada’s estate was embroiled in a dispute with Penguin Classics, which republished “No-No Boy” as part of a set of early Asian-American literary works. (I wrote the introduction to one.) Okada died in 1971, unaware that his book had been discovered by a younger generation. The “Aiiieeeee!” editors brought it back into print themselves in 1976, helping Okada’s family transfer the copyright to the University of Washington Press three years later. The case was eventually resolved, and Penguin stopped publishing the American edition. But the dispute echoed some of the complications of ethnic literature’s acceptance as part of the cultural mainstream.

Minority writing has always assumed a kind of antagonism, a prefab agony about being invariably misunderstood. This part of “Aiiieeeee!” still feels resonant. Yet if you look at the upper strata of literary culture—the books published and reviewed and given prizes—it feels as if diversity won. Diversity has been honored as a principle, and it has become more prevalent as a marketing strategy. As Asian-American literature grew over the decades, and the study of it was professionalized, the reckless, almost punk attitude of “Aiiieeeee!” came to seem antiquated. Its editors, convinced that acceptance was impossible, had been drawn to the idea of perpetual marginalization.

If cultural capital accrues around authors and books that appease our appetite for inclusion, our classrooms and bookstores are better off as a re-



sult. Decades after “The Woman Warrior,” the canonical experience of Asian-American life remains the first generation’s negotiation of the immigrant household. It’s what gives successful films such as “Crazy Rich Asians” and, on a smaller scale, “The Farewell” a footing in America, even though they take place mostly in Asia. But has the balance of power actually been disturbed? The enshrinement of the Asian-immigrant narrative still crowds out alternative visions of Asian-American difference. And narratives of upward mobility can be part of how “minority” literature joins the majors. In 2010, the cultural critic Ilan Stavans was asked about his work as the general editor of “The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature.” Stavans seemed to feel that there was a great symbolic importance to this legendary publisher recognizing an overlooked lineage of writing in America. He wrote, “It is a book that all middle-class Latinos need, proof that we’ve made it: We’ve arrived.”

It’s telling that Stavans named the middle class, a suggestion that full assimilation is achieved through representation. The “Aiiieeeee!” editors, by contrast, never imagined “arriving.” I

first read the anthology in college, a time when we cultivate our sense of zealous singularity by rejecting the same in a previous generation. The book seemed overly earnest. Revisiting it today, I was struck by how fatalistic the editors sound, positioning the Asian-American as the ultimate underdog, forever denied the possibility of literary voice. They can’t see the vast energies that will one day gather in their wake, under the banner of Asian-American literature, or the possibility that markers of difference will come to distinguish, rather than limit, a writer. “Aiiieeeee!” is a manifesto suffused with tragedy, a struggle against isolation. As part of Okada’s biographical sketch, the editors excerpt a letter that he had sent his publisher. “Providing my efforts are unsuccessful,” he wrote, “I pray equally fervently that there is another like myself who is creating a similar work which will find its way into publication.” There were others out there. But you can’t choose who or what follows, whether it’s “Aiiieeeee!” or Maxine Hong Kingston—a legacy that is cultish and obscure, or one where it turns out that you wrote a great American novel, after all. ♦

QUEENS OF THE NIGHT

Three new operas: "The Snow Queen," "Heart Chamber," and "Orlando."

BY ALEX ROSS



If you dare nothing, you can change nothing," the Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth recently told the magazine *Profil*. "In the moment of paralysis and the resulting decay, there is always the possibility of bringing something about." Neuwirth was addressing the creative stasis at international opera houses, where a few dozen canonical pieces are heard with numbing frequency. The reactionary outlook of these institutions is evident in the fact that operas by female composers remain unusual. Neuwirth's "Orlando," a radical feminist adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, recently had its première at the Vienna State Opera. It stands

in contrast to a Viennese season that features women dying of consumption, flinging themselves off buildings, and riding horses into funeral pyres.

Notwithstanding the conservatism of the opera business, many top houses offer a world première every season or two. On a one-week swing through Europe in early December, I caught three such productions: Hans Abrahamsen's "The Snow Queen," at the Royal Danish Theatre, in Copenhagen; Chaya Czernowin's "Heart Chamber," at the Deutsche Oper, in Berlin; and "Orlando." One suspects that, in many cases, commissioning work plays a palliative role: a company can ap-

plaud itself for having acknowledged contemporary reality and then scurry back to the safe space of the past. I wonder, though, whether a slow sea change might be in progress. "That was my life," a woman said to a friend after Czernowin's opera. It is not a comment you hear often at "Don Giovanni" or "Tosca."

"The Snow Queen" is outwardly the most traditional of the three new operas. It is based on the mighty fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, which has undergone dozens of adaptations, including, tenuously, "Frozen," the animated film and Broadway musical. Abrahamsen and his co-librettist, Henrik Engelbrecht, hew more closely than most of their predecessors to the Andersen original. This is not surprising, given that they are Danish artists taking hold of a Danish classic. The story pivots on the shattering of a mirror, manufactured by a troll, that magnifies the worst in people and hides the good. A boy named Kay, having caught slivers of the mirror in his eye and his heart, falls prey to the allure of the Snow Queen, who takes him on her sled and entraps him in her ice kingdom. Gerda, Kay's childhood friend, must undergo various fantastical far-northern adventures before she can save him.

The trickiest challenge in making a new version of "The Snow Queen" is how to handle the title character, who all too easily exemplifies the stereotype of the cold, predatory female. Abrahamsen upends that dynamic by choosing to give the role to a male singer—at the première, the formidable Danish bass-baritone Johan Reuter. It would seem that the malignity of the troll is inhabiting the Snow Queen's form. Unfortunately, Francisco Negrin, who directed the inaugural production, obscured this insight by subsuming the role into a confusing multipart character called the Universal Being, who does not appear in the libretto or the score. With its blandly abstract set and kitschy L.E.D. lighting, the staging did little to flesh out Andersen's world.

No matter: Robert Houssart, conducting the Royal Danish Orchestra, exulted in the kaleidoscopic gorgeousness of Abrahamsen's score. The com-

The composers Hans Abrahamsen, Chaya Czernowin, and Olga Neuwirth.

poser belongs to a Danish new-music tradition that has refashioned simple-seeming tonal materials into a language of gleaming freshness. “The Snow Queen,” like prior Abrahamsen works, has textures that shine and dance before the ears, with strings issuing harmonics high in their range, brass rumbling in the lower registers, and blurred triads in the middle range. More surprising are passages of child-like innocence—for example, a euphonious chorus of singing flowers—and episodes of polyrhythmic orchestral exuberance, as in Kay’s wild sleigh ride with the Queen. This magnificent score deserves to travel the world; in a suitably cinematic guise, it could conquer the Met.

If “The Snow Queen” extends the medium’s long-standing attachment to fable and legend, Czernowin’s “Heart Chamber” nods to the modern tradition of *Zeitoper*—“now opera,” or opera of the moment. Composers of the nineteen-twenties pioneered the trend, rejecting mythic trappings in favor of ocean liners and foxtrots. “Heart Chamber,” for which Czernowin wrote her own libretto, tells of a contemporary love affair infiltrated by anxieties and hesitations. In an early scene, the soprano sings, “Hey! Pick up your phone! Are you home?” Later, the baritone sings, “You can’t just suddenly close up like that.” The feeling is less of two souls being joined in eternal love than of two individuals negotiating the intersection of their separate lives.

At first glance, Czernowin, an Israeli native who teaches at Harvard, is an unlikely composer for such a project. Much of her work has tended toward images of primordial upheaval and elemental change. Her previous operas, “Pnima” and “Infinite Now,” conjured scenes of twentieth-century catastrophe: the Holocaust in the former, the First World War in the latter. She avoids familiar harmonic signposts and is inclined toward spectacularly vivid eruptions of instrumental and electronic sound. The wonder of “Heart Chamber” is how she uses her radical sonic palette to evoke the stream of consciousness beneath the surface of ordinary life.

The most astonishing passage comes

when the baritone answers the phone and accepts the idea of going for a walk. This nondescript exchange unleashes an apocalyptic inundation from the orchestra—one of several episodes marked “Sound surge/flood” in the score—with brass bellowing stentorian tones and a pianist pummeling the keyboard with his hands and arms. We experience the terror, as well as the joy, of intense love. (At the premiere performances, instrumental roles were taken by members of Ensemble Nikel, favorite collaborators of Czernowin’s.) “Infinite Now” contains a similar all-enveloping storm, suggestive of war’s chaos. Here the storm is internal, and within a minute or two it fades, across an expanse of sustained chords, into near-silence, with a single voice emitting isolated, high-pitched peeps. The spoken dialogue that follows is, again, mundane: “Cold tonight. . . . The days are shorter.” But the sensuous, breathy texture beneath the voices indicates a transformation.

The challenge in staging such a piece is to make visible this disparity between outer appearance and inner feeling. Claus Guth, who directed the Deutsche Oper production, seemed concerned more with the exterior side. He and the design team presented alluring visuals—a staircase outside an apartment complex was the dominant image, often with figures moving in slow motion—but they had the look of a chilly, clinical art film about the disaffected bourgeoisie. Those interior storms went largely unremarked. Even so, Patrizia Ciofi and Dietrich Henschel gave vibrant, nuanced performances of the lead roles, and the composer-conductor Johannes Kalitzke marshalled an opulently raging orchestra.

“Orlando” was the most ambitious of the three operas, and, perhaps inevitably, the most problematic. It attempted to be mythic and modern in equal measure. Woolf’s novel tells of an Elizabethan nobleman and poet who abides through the centuries and migrates from the male gender to the female. Neuwirth and her co-librettist, Catherine Filloux, made the sensible decision to extend the story into the present day, so that we see Orlando in

the context of the 1968 social revolutions, the end of the Cold War, and the age of the Internet. Orlando also has a child, who adopts the language of transgender activism. The dangers of resurgent fascism and environmental catastrophe do not go unnoticed. A narrator intones, “The more the world turns in a direction Orlando doesn’t want it to go, the greater the urge for her to write.”

Neuwirth, who came of age in the punk scene of the nineteen-eighties, has the virtue of extreme unpredictability, her music characterized by a controlled wildness and purposeful instability. The “Orlando” score runs the gamut from Elizabethan vocal polyphony to post-punk assault; in later scenes, a drummer, a saxophonist, an electric guitarist, and a keyboardist are wheeled onstage. The writing for diverse ensembles is brilliant throughout, but the first act feels considerably more cohesive than the second, which sometimes lapses into the style of a sweeping PBS documentary. (The voice of Winston Churchill is present on the soundtrack to a bizarre degree.) The libretto, meanwhile, loses the advantage of Woolf’s prose as it progresses into the modern period. A thought like “More stories have to be told about all of us” is welcome, but it needs more poetry in it.

Nonetheless, the world premiere was a startling and memorable night. The mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey gave a stupendous account of the title role, executing hyper-elegant coloratura as confidently as she did agitprop orations. Polly Graham directed with an eye toward glamorous spectacle; Rei Kawakubo, of Comme des Garçons, provided handsomely garish costumes. Matthias Pintscher, in the pit, found the connecting threads in Neuwirth’s polyglot score. Then, there was the veteran downtown-New York performer Justin Vivian Bond, who in the nineteen-nineties won cult fame as part of the slash-and-burn cabaret act Kiki and Herb. Anyone who saw that duo sow chaos in small clubs could only laugh in happy disbelief as Bond, in the role of Orlando’s child, took to the storied Vienna stage to shout, “Fuck the patriarchy!” Something had been dared, and something had changed. ♦

DANCING

SONG OF EXPERIENCE

Noche Flamenca gets deeper with age.

BY JENNIFER HOMANS

*The setting of “Entre Tú y Yo” takes us back to flamenco’s misty origins.*

Soledad Barrio has a way of entering the stage like an animal circling her prey. She is a flamenco dancer, so her back is arched in a majestic serpentine curve, her arms and hands an ornamental filigree. This is not a glamorous diva in a ruffle-trained gown but a woman cut from plain black cloth, buttoned high, fully covered. We can see from the slight sag of her jawline that she is not young anymore—a fact that, if anything, adds to her power. As the musicians strum, pick, beat, clap, and sing, her heels break into staccato rhythmic patterns. Finally, she dives into a low, plunging turn, and all decorum falls away. Her hands clutch and flay, she squats with legs wide as in childbirth, and her body

pitches and sways in a dance that would be almost witchlike were it not for the rigor of her flamenco stance.

This tour-de-force solo was the culminating dance in Noche Flamenca’s “Entre Tú y Yo,” at the Joyce Theatre, in November. The company, which Barrio founded with her husband, Martín Santangelo, in 1993, is based in New York and will perform “Entre Tú y Yo” in Philadelphia in January, before returning to the city in March, to perform “Antígona” at La Mama. The program notes tell us that “Entre Tú y Yo” comprises short pieces choreographed by Santangelo: erotic vignettes inspired by the Viennese writer Arthur Schnitzler’s play “La Ronde”; a dance based on

poems by refugee children; and two traditional, partially improvised solos, including Barrio’s. But these parts are so artfully stitched together that the performance—which takes place on a stripped-down stage, with dark, Goyaesque lighting and only a few chairs for props—feels like something much simpler: a gathering of dancers and musicians. For two hours, and not a moment of lag, we are given a tremendous show.

The setting is designed to take us back to flamenco’s misty origins, which lie with persecuted Roma people who came from India, some of whom settled, in the fifteenth century, in reclusive slums and cave dwellings in Andalusia, in southern Spain. But flamenco, an art of the dispossessed, also drew from musical and poetic traditions of Arabs and Sephardic Jews victimized in the expulsions and the forced conversions of the Spanish Inquisition—not to mention from African and Caribbean music and dance, which were imported, exported, and reimported in the Atlantic slave trade. It was influenced by outcasts, too, including peddlers, prostitutes, and impoverished women hired to weep at funerals. Its suppressed eroticism may owe something to restrictive Roma and Catholic sexual mores: today, it’s hard not to see in it a kind of feminine revenge for the cult of virginity. Flamenco’s music and dance were later also shaped by ballet and the commercial culture of glitzy urban night clubs and music halls, and by foreigners who saw in flamenco something exotic, erotic, oriental. Even Franco’s regime, which initially favored folk forms that were seen as safer, eventually promoted flamenco as a part of Spain’s tourist industry.

One of flamenco’s touchstones, embraced by Noche Flamenca, is the poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, who was executed in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War. In the twenties, he set out to reclaim the ancient origins of flamenco’s “deep song.” He did not invent the idea of *duende*—a kind of demonic spirit that could possess a musician or a dancer—but he was among the first to attach it to flamenco. *Duende*, he wrote, is like a muse or an angel, except that it is an emissary of “black sounds,” with “wings of rusty knives,” which “smashes styles” and “leans on human pain with no consolation.” Bar-

rio grew up in Madrid, amid stories of her family's suffering during the Civil War—her grandfather was imprisoned by the Franco regime—and it was Carlos Saura's 1981 dance film based on Lorca's "Blood Wedding" that inspired her to dance professionally.

Despite its mixed and wide-ranging sources, flamenco often sees itself as a bloodline. The "Entre Tú y Yo" program notes tell us that many of Noche Flamenca's musicians are Gypsies (a term proudly used in flamenco circles) or were taught from childhood by Andalusian masters. But a number of flamenco artists have been non-Gypsies or foreigners. One of the company's dancers is Argentine; another is American. Santangelo is part Argentine and part American Jew; Barrio is Spanish but not Gypsy. She says that many Spaniards, because of the brutal history stretching from the Inquisition to Franco's fascist regime, know little about their ancestry. Santangelo told me that one of his teachers, the famed Manuel Santiago Maya, known as Manolete, used to wear a Star of David. When Manolete was asked why, he responded, "I don't know—my grandfather wore it."

The music in the show is the work of Santangelo and the guitarists Eugenio Iglesias and Salva de María. Much of it is based on traditional forms, but not all. The performance opens, for example, with a flamenco version of "Historia de un Amor," a lyrical popular song by the Panamanian songwriter Carlos Eleta Almarán, used in the 1956 film of the same name by the Mexican director Roberto Gavaldón. When, in the show, Carmina Cortes's hoarse, guttural sound tears through the melody's smooth fabric, we know we have begun.

In flamenco, rhythm is everything. The guitars lead, joined by hand clapping, finger snapping, *cajón* (a box drum), heel stamping, and vocal call and response. One of the most astonishing numbers in the show is a castanet solo by the percussionist David (Chupete) Rodríguez, who sits alone, center stage, in a pool of light. He makes the castanets chase, chatter, love, argue, fight, dance—he builds from pure rhythm a complicated and humorous drama. Reyes Martín, glorious in a tight red dress that maps her mature and voluptuous figure, sings and teases the dancer

Jasiel Nahin—who answers with a battery of syncopated heel stamps and flips his jacket off one shoulder, like a bullfighter, setting his youthful bravura against her knowing sensuality.

We hear the ancient-sounding "scorched throat," as Lorca would put it, of Manuel Heredia, an older, bard-like Gypsy singer, with a thick beard and long frizzy hair. In one number, he hurls his lament at the dancer Marina Elana, pulling her into his cavernous emotion. ("Your body has to be the throat of the singer," Barrio has said.) Then, there is Elana's sensual duet with a blue satin dress—a sharp contrast to Barrio's plain black attire. Elana begins on the floor, crumpled beneath a pile of ruffles. As she rises, her bare back to us, she pulls the lavish dress up onto her body, fitting herself into its curves and working its long train into a lyrical dance, an image recalling John Singer Sargent's 1882 painting "El Jaleo."

As for Barrio, she is everywhere, even in her absence. She leaves plenty of heel stamping—and the dress—to Elana, who, at times, feels like an avatar of Barrio's younger self. It is an impression affirmed in a dance that Barrio and Santangelo choreographed for the two women. The duet is one of the few of the vignettes to break with the flamenco form. In it, Barrio and Elana are dressed, twinlike, in tight black pants and shirts. At one point, Barrio touches Elana, and later they hold each other's head in an anguished grip. These are startling moments, because flamenco, for all its eroticism, does not abide touching. At the instant of contact, the sexuality of the form weakens and dissipates. Barrio has said that she was drawing on Ingmar Bergman's film "Persona," with its fatally merged identities. Whatever the psychological connotations, what we see is an engrossing struggle over a dance that must be passed on—but not yet.

At its core, flamenco is not about couples or love or sex. It is an improvised solo form about individual fantasy and inner life. The second half of "Entre Tú y Yo" begins with youth. Nahin and Elana each perform a terrific solo full of the joy of technical mastery. Then the elders take over, and the deepest dancing begins. Antonio (El Chupete) Rodríguez (the brother of the percus-

sionist) is a dancer who seems to know everything. In his dance, a traditional form known as *soleá por bulerías*, he tackles sophisticated syncopations, arms flying, body akimbo, angrier, funnier, masked, unmasked—a man in the throes of himself. He can unleash a fury of heel stamping or, just as mysteriously, turn an open palm into a question: Is this really all there is?

Then comes Barrio's *soleá*, another traditional form. Over the years, I have seen Barrio perform this dance many times, but rarely with such heartbreak. Her performance is different each night, but it is never, as she put it to me, "a vomit of emotion." There are key emotional gestures, and also precise rules and signals between dancers and musicians. They play off one another, making split-second decisions that steer the music, the song, and the dance. The cues are complicated; the more often the dancers perform the dance, the better they get. Which means that, for a dancer, *duende* is not only a mystical inspiration. It is the work of experience—of aging.

Flamenco is punishing on the back and the knees, and Barrio, who was born in 1964, doesn't train as intensively as she used to. Instead, she swims. She comes to the stage, she told me, present in the moment, asking only, "What can I do?" There is pain, which partly explains the anxiety that the audience senses as Barrio circles the stage, and the touch of fear before she plunges into her dance. She is figuring it out on the spot. "If I can't raise my leg up, then I look around for a deeper solution," she told me. "Some nights it is there. Others I am searching for the entire dance and never find it." She is not looking for a way to disguise or face-lift movements she can no longer perform as she once did. Instead, she allows herself to squat and wail, to go inside her own body and take what's there. The result is paradoxical: the less she can do, the more her range expands. She told me, "I'd rather have a house with three objects than with a hundred. You can make a design with three things and know them well. A hundred things is not so easy. What are they there for?" As I watched Barrio searching for her dance, I found myself thinking what a relief it is, at a time of interminable newness, to hear some ancient, and aging, voices. ♦

HOME COMFORTS

"Little Women."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Composing herself, and pausing to gather her wits, Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) waits at the door of an office. Then she takes the plunge and enters a world of men. She has come to see a newspaper editor named Dashwood (Tracy Letts), hoping to sell him a story. She claims to be a go-between, bringing the work of a friend, but a

ated act, however fleeting, and Jo, you could argue, is best understood in motion. Alcott claimed, of her own youth, that she "fell with a crash into girlhood," and movies, let's face it, are made for crashing. When I think of Katharine Hepburn's Jo, in George Cukor's delectable "Little Women" of 1933, what I remember is not her chatter, as rau-

night, with Jo lamenting an earlier flare of hot temper. Marmee is unsurprised:

"You remind me of myself."

"But you're never angry."

"I'm angry nearly every day of my life."

This exchange is taken, almost verbatim, from the book—one of those raw and startling moments which cast a shadow of perplexity on its reputation for sweetness and light. Fury, Alcott tells us, is an inherited trait; Marmee reveals that she was schooled by her mother, long ago, in what we would call anger management, and hopes that Jo, in turn, will master her own wrath. What emerges from Gerwig's movie, though, is a strong sense, such as Alcott would not have dared to admit, that indignation is not just the natural lot of women but their rousing right. In a war-wearied society, as in the tight embrace of the Marches, there is much to be angry about. It's one thing to be a little woman because you are not yet grown; quite another to be belittled by the larger world.

The difficult matter of that growth, and of how best to represent it in the short span of a movie, has tested everyone who has sought to wrestle Alcott's novel onto the screen. Amy, the youngest of the sisters, is especially tricky, since she has to progress from the age of twelve or so (a precocious twelve, but still) to the status of a wife. In Mervyn LeRoy's effort, of 1949, Amy was quietly promoted to the rank of second youngest—a wise precaution, perhaps, given that she was played by Elizabeth Taylor. In the more intense retelling of 1994, directed by Gillian Armstrong, the character was split into two, with Kirsten Dunst handing over to Samantha Mathis once the curtain came down on Amy's childhood.

In the latest film, she is played by Florence Pugh, whose star, from "Lady Macbeth" (2016) to "Midsommar" (2019), has continued to rocket. (Next spring, she will battle through "Black Widow," as Scarlett Johansson's sister. A slight change of tone from the Marches.) Pugh is twenty-three but seems older, with her frightening poise and the pass-me-a-smoke throatiness of her voice, and while the innocence of Amy, equipped with long blond braids, is a stretch for her, the willful tenacity presents no prob-



Not all sweetness and light: Greta Gerwig adapts the March sisters' story.

glance at Jo's inky fingers proclaims her as the author. As Dashwood takes the manuscript and crosses out page after page, her spirits droop, whereupon he confounds her by accepting the tale for publication. Such is Jo's delight that, on leaving the office, she doesn't—or can't—walk home in a manner befitting a young lady. She runs.

So begins "Little Women," a new adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel. The writer and director is Greta Gerwig, and, if you reckon that movies have muscle memories, cast your mind back to Noah Baumbach's "Frances Ha" (2012), in which Gerwig, as the heroine, hared along the streets of New York. The rhetoric of liberation, however grand, is no match for the liber-

cous as a raven, but her impromptu fencing match in a drawing room, or the galumphing rumpus she makes when, at her mother's call, she clatters down the stairs.

Ronan is less loud than Hepburn, but she has inherited some of her hustle and bustle, and anyone who admired Ronan in the title role of Gerwig's "Lady Bird" (2017) will note a similar fixity of purpose in her portrayal of Jo. Also, when she appears within the same frame as Laura Dern, who plays Marmee, they genuinely look like mother and daughter, with their long, grave features, and you can see Marmee wondering, as every parent does: If I spy so much of myself in my child, is that cause for hope or fear? They sit together on the floor, at

lem. So urgent, indeed, is the thirst for experience that rages in Ronan and Pugh, under Gerwig's command, that the other actors who complete the March quartet—Emma Watson as Meg, and Eliza Scanlen as the vulnerable Beth—are doomed to make less of an impression.

That is never an issue for Meryl Streep, and she is on suitably beady form as Aunt March, who believes that a propitious marriage to a man of means remains, like it or not, the most reliable way in which a gentlewoman can survive and thrive. Being Streep, though, she manages to hint—with a gleam in her penetrating gaze, and a clairvoyance that Alcott, again, would scarcely have allowed herself—that an alternative state of affairs, in a less tightly laced future, may prove worthy of deliberation. Not that Aunt March will live to see it.

Some viewers, I suspect, will be saggy with foreboding, like reluctant guests (“Must we meet the Marches, *again?*”), as they wend their way to “Little Women” over the festive period. Yet wend they will, because the saga of Jo and the gang will simply not release its grip, so crowded and occasionally so unbearable are the emotions packed into this plain tale. The new film may be the umpteenth dramatization of the book, but so what? I’m already looking forward to ump plus one.

Every version has its virtues. It’s sobering to reflect that Cukor’s “Little Women” is nearer in time to the Civil War than it is to us; it could conceivably have been seen by an eighty-year-old whose father had died in the conflict, and the ghost of loss and frailty seems to dawdle on the fringes of the merri-

ment. No less wrenching is the sight of Margaret O’Brien, the Beth of the 1949 movie, setting off to thank a rich old man for the gift of his piano; with her starched frock, and her solemn demeanor strangely close to tears, she could be Alice in Wonderland, and the whole film, robed in Technicolor, retains a picture-book enchantment.

Gerwig’s innovations are something else. The costumes, designed by Jacqueline Durran, are a triumph of the homespun: a plausible patchwork of things borrowed, mended, or handed down. Jo, scribbling in the attic, has clearly raided a drawer in a rush, wanting only to be warm. And, if there’s a National Waistcoat League, this movie could be its mascot; nifty examples are sported by Jo, Laurie (Timothée Chalamet), the handsome neighbor whom she loves so dearly that she doesn’t need to marry him, and his sad grandfather (Chris Cooper), whose mansion lies within strolling distance of the March household. As for Professor Bhaer (Louis Garrel), whom Jo finds as her fellow-lodger when she moves to New York, I’m afraid that I failed to notice his waistcoats, so charmed was I by the audacity of the casting. On the page, he is a porky middle-aged German. (Laurie says, “I consider him a trump, in the fullest sense of that expressive word.” Yikes!) In the film, he becomes an ardent French smolderer. It’s like ordering bratwurst and getting coq au vin.

But Gerwig’s coup is chronological: to and fro she darts across the years, chopping the plot into flashbacks and flash-forwards, and keeping us on our toes. (The darting is easier to follow on a second viewing.) The results can be

alarming, as weddings adjoin funerals and tantrums melt into firelit peace, but what the mixture yields is a kind of creed: a faith in the fullness of lives that might be deemed unexceptional. The movie’s outward gaze is radical, no question, yet it refuses to scorn the comforts—of ingrained habits, and of home—that are honored by the conservative imagination. Such equipoise is almost as rare in cinema as it is, God knows, in politics, and right now, though we can’t foretell whether time will be cruel or kind to Gerwig’s “Little Women,” it may just be the best film yet made by an American woman.

As with all good Americana, violence is never far away. This is a family flick, with a PG rating, but many a pinch and a punch are delivered by the March clan (“I really did want to hurt you,” Amy says to Jo, who forbade her a trip to the theatre), and Jo, offered an arm by Laurie as they take the air, responds with a manly thwack. Whether such blows are landed in Alcott’s text is hardly the point, for this is not only a film of the book but also, more stirring still, a film *about* the book. What Jo ends up producing, for the demanding Dashwood, is a summation of all that we have observed; she writes the film into being, so to speak, mothering the facts and the multiple fates of her loved ones into fiction. At the climax, we see the story being printed, stitched, bound in leather, and handed to Jo, as if she, not Alcott, were the author of “Little Women.” She stands there smiling, her restlessness finally quelled—proud, content, composed. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mort Gerberg, must be received by Sunday, January 5th. The finalists in the December 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 20th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“Please watch your small step.”
Joel Nelson, Goleta, Calif.

“I’m sorry, I just assumed you’d want to go up.”
Daniel Pankratz, Huntington Beach, Calif.

“After the top floor, you’re on your own.”
Deane Nesbitt, Longmeadow, Mass.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I was stationed at CVS during the war on drugs.”
Charlie Wollborg, Detroit, Mich.



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